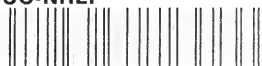


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A
LEADING
LADY
HENRY HERMAN



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A LEADING LADY

A Story of the Stage

BY

HENRY HERMAN

JOINT-AUTHOR OF 'THE BISHOPS' BIBLE,' 'ONE TRAVELLER RETURNS,'
'A SINGULAR SENSE OF DUTY,' ETC.



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MAH

I.

So, Lady Flora, take my lay,
And if you find no moral there,
Go, look in any glass and say,
What moral is in being fair.
Oh, to what uses shall we put
The wild-weed flower that simply blows?
And is there any moral shut
Within the bosom of the rose?

II.

But any man that walks the mead,
In bud, or blade, or bloom may find,
According as his humours lead,
A meaning suited to his mind.
And liberal applications lie
In Art like Nature, dearest friend;
So 'twere to cramp its use, if I
Should hook it to some useful end.

TENNYSON.

A LEADING LADY

I.

AN elderly bald-headed man, dressed in a seedy gray tweed suit, was standing, hat in hand, at the end of the little narrow passage which gave access to the business office of the Royal Charing Cross Theatre. In front of him the closed and locked door barred further progress. He shuffled about for a moment or two, as if undecided whether or not to venture upon asking for admittance, and stared at the flaring gaslight which illuminated the little corridor, and turned and twisted upon his heel twice or thrice in evident anxious self-communion.

‘I’ll risk it,’ he said to himself; ‘he can only bite my head off, and be done with it.’

With this decision to be ready for the worst, he gave a faint and feeble knock at the closed door.

He waited for awhile, but no answer was returned to him.

He knocked again, with the same result.

‘Hang it all!’ he said to himself, ‘I’ve got to see him. He’s just got to see me, that’s about all. The Lord only knows what’ll happen if I don’t see him.’

He waited for another minute or so, and then gave a bolder and more imperative knock, accompanying this summons with the query loudly but falteringly spoken :

‘Is Mr. Brewster in?’

A voice, gruff and irritated, replied from within :

‘No ; he’s not.’

This answer both puzzled and annoyed the bald-headed elderly man.

‘But that’s you speaking, Mr. Brewster,’ he retorted.

‘What if I am?’ came the reply from within the locked door. ‘You asked if I was in, and I said no.’

‘But, if you please, Mr. Brewster, I must see you—I must speak to you,’ pleaded the bald-headed one, stooping down, as if, by approaching his mouth to the vicinity of the keyhole, he could better be heard and understood by the person in the room.

‘The supers say they won’t go on to-night without some money.’

‘Tell them to go to blazes, and stay off!’ roared the man in the room, ‘and don’t worry me. You ought to know better, Carter, than to come here worrying me when I am so worried already.’

The super-master—for he was the super-master of the Royal Charing Cross Theatre—breathed a heavy sigh, and in a voice of emotion, which might have deceived anybody less experienced than the adamant business-manager, he pleaded:

‘But, Mr. Brewster, you can’t mean what you are saying. If the supers don’t go on, there’ll be no play; and if there’s no play, the audience will want their money back.’

‘Devilish little will they want to get back in that case, I can tell you!’ rejoined the business-manager, still from within. ‘I suppose I’ve got to see you, and to hear what you’ve got to say.’

Heavy footsteps were heard across the carpet, and the door was unlocked and unbolted. It had apparently been secured as if intended to defy an onslaught of burglars or of a troop of warriors. A big, burly, round-faced, clean-shaven man, with tiny greenish-brown eyes, that were continually

blinking, and barely any eyebrows at all, wearing his scanty sandy hair flattened against the sides of his forehead by means of cosmetic and pomade, appeared and scowled at the trembling super-master. He was shirt-sleeved, and wore the waist-coat, trousers, and white tie of evening dress.

‘Come in,’ he cried, ‘and don’t keep me longer than you can help. Don’t stand there shivering as if I were going to eat you. What’s up now? Have they struck?’

‘No, Mr. Brewster,’ replied the super-master, ‘they haven’t struck yet, but they’re going to. Downright dead certain they are, unless I can give them some money before the curtain goes up.’

‘And who’s put that into their heads?’ cried the business-manager. ‘Who’s put them up to that dodge? They were willing to wait till Saturday morning when I spoke to them the night before last. Who’s been playing tricks here? Is that one of your doings, Carter? If I find it out you’ll never again get a day’s job in this theatre.’

‘Oh no, sir—believe me, it isn’t me, sir,’ retorted the bald-headed man. ‘They’re all of them hard up—deucedly hard up. You see, they have only been paid half their money last Saturday, and they

get so little that they can't afford to go on any longer.'

'That isn't it; don't you come with that story to me,' replied Brewster. 'There's something very wrong in this business, and, mark me, Carter, don't you let me find out that you've had a hand in it.'

The old man drew himself up.

'I don't know what you mean, Mr. Brewster. I have been in this theatre now some six-and-twenty years, and I have done my duty by the managers as has been in it, and I'm doing my duty by Mr. Watson now. If you want to know what's wrong in it, I can tell you.'

'Well, and what?' exclaimed the ponderous one ferociously.

'That's wrong in it,' replied the old man. 'The big ones—those who get twenty and thirty pounds a week—gets their money, and the working man and the poor super, who has only ten, and twelve, and fifteen shillings a week, doesn't. That's what's wrong in this theatre. Now you have asked me for it, and you have just got the straight griffin; and you can take it as you like. And I tell you what, Mr. Brewster, I've stood enough of this. You have

charged me with doing underhanded work. I haven't done anything underhanded in my life, and perhaps, if you can, you had better settle this business yourself, and I'll not interfere about it. Good-evening, sir.'

He bowed politely, turned, and moved to the door. The business-manager glared at the old man fiercely for a moment or two, and then, changing his tone and manner altogether, he said suavely :

'Oh, don't cut up like that, Carter ; I didn't mean to say anything against you.'

'You charged me with underhand practices, sir,' retorted the old man, feeling that he had gained a point in standing upon his dignity.

'Oh, I did nothing of the kind,' rejoined Brewster ; 'I really didn't.'

'You insinuated as much,' replied Carter, being now sure that his services were needed in this emergency, at any rate, and trying to make the most of the momentary position ; 'and I won't let any man say that I do that which I ought to be ashamed of.'

'Oh, well, drop that now,' answered the big man, 'and let's come to business. How much do they want ? Tell me the lowest farthing you can do with.'

‘Here’s the list, Mr. Brewster,’ replied Carter. ‘There’s fifty odd pounds due to them altogether. There’s eighty-six of them, but I think if I could give them three or four shillings each I could tide over until to-morrow, at any rate.’

‘You’ll have to make a tenner do,’ answered Brewster. ‘I don’t know how I shall manage even that.’

‘I don’t think a tenner will do,’ retorted the super-master; ‘but I’ll try, if you like. You had better give me fifteen pounds; I shouldn’t like to be responsible to get them on with less than that.’

‘You’ll have to make a tenner do by hook or by crook,’ said Brewster; ‘I can’t manage more. Come down with me to the pay-box, and I’ll see if I can find the money.’

With that he closed his writing-desk, and put on his evening dress coat.

‘A deuced shame!’ he grumbled; ‘they ought to know better. They have had plenty of our money, and they know they’ll get what’s due to them. Come along!’

He locked the office-door, and the pair walked along the passage to the dress-circle level, and descended by the pass staircase to the pit and

gallery pay-box. The business-manager put his head through the little hole where the money-taker received payment for the tickets which he sold, and asked :

‘ How much have you got, Burton ?’

The man replied :

‘ Six pound ten.’

‘ Oh, Jerusalem !’ exclaimed Brewster. ‘ The pit choke full, and only sixty-five paid !’

‘ That’s all, Mr. Brewster,’ answered the man.

‘ And you—how much have *you* got in the gallery?’ he asked the money-taker on the other side.

‘ Five pound twelve.’

‘ Worse than ever!’ he ejaculated in a despairing tone.

‘ Yes, sir,’ said the money-taker, ‘ it’s getting worse and worse. It’ll be about seven pounds odd to-night. Last night we finished with nine pounds three.’

‘ Give me a five-pound bag, each of you,’ called out the business-manager ; and receiving two little brown-paper bags, each filled with silver coins, he handed them to the super-master, who was standing by his side.

‘There, take that. You heard what these men said. You can tell them on the stage—there’s no need hiding it, else they might think, because the pit and gallery are full, there’s money in the house. Tell them that I am giving them about half of what I have, and that the musicians and the chorus, and the printers and the bill-posters, and Heaven only knows who, are all waiting for money in the same way, and then they’ll see if I’m doing what is right by them.’

The bald-headed man took the money with a look of pity nearly.

‘I’ll do my best, sir,’ he said, ‘you can rely upon it. I beg your pardon for having spoken rather huffishly just now; I didn’t mean it, sir.’

‘All right,’ replied Brewster. ‘I know you. Go on: do your best.’

The big man stood for awhile in front of the pay-box, with his crush hat set at the back of his head, and his hands in his trousers-pockets jingling his keys and coins.

‘A fine mess,’ he said to himself; ‘a fine mess we are in! I’d like to lay a wager there is not twenty pounds in front and not ten pounds at the libraries—about forty pounds altogether; and our

expenses are just one hundred and ten pounds a night. I suppose it'll come—it's got to come sooner or later, unless somebody steps into the breach ; and I don't think anybody is likely to step into the breach and fill the big hole with his coin.'

He walked slowly into the pit, which seethed with people. A sea of human heads was spread before his eyes — a bobbing, rising, half-tumultuous sea of men and women, all talking, staring, turning, twisting, as an audience will before the curtain rises.

'There are fully seven or eight hundred here,' Brewster continued in self-communion, as he glanced around the big place ; 'and the stalls are filling fast too ; and to think that out of seven or eight hundred only sixty-five have paid—nobody would believe it !'

He walked with slow and measured step to the pit pass-door, and thence went out into the stall lobby. The tide of fashionables in all the glory of evening dress was pouring fast into the theatre. The vast entrance-hall was lined with exotics and palms ; large mirrors reflected the gleam of crystal lustres ; the thick pile-carpet muffled the footfall ; velvet-covered seats invited the passer to luxurious

repose. Comfort and wealth were obtrusively apparent everywhere; no visible sign of that terrible struggle, of that desperate fight for existence, in which the management of the theatre were momentarily engaged. Ladies in furs and plush cloaks, and in all the finery of the nineteenth-century evening-dress, and gentlemen in the half-mournful garb of swallow-tail and white cravat, were streaming past in little crowds. Brewster had to stand aside for a brief space to allow intending spectators to pass by him. They were all chattering gaily, blithely, and little thought that the business-manager was taking stock of them, and counting them simply like so many heads, each one of whom was either worth ten and sixpence or nothing, according to the kind of voucher they presented to the check-taker.

‘Nearly all paper,’ he said to himself; ‘devilish good paper—a deuced sight too good! These people ought to pay; they can afford to pay. I wonder how they all get hold of it—it beats me. Watson flings his signature about so recklessly.’

‘Let me look at the stall-sheet,’ he said to the man in the box-office; and the man handed him the paper.

Brewster glanced over it and heaved a great sigh.

‘It’s exactly what I expected—nearly all blue.’

His step was slower, and he kept his gaze on the ground as, with his hands in his pockets, he strolled up the steps and walked upstairs to his own office. As he stopped in the passage to unlock his door, he noticed that a man was waiting for him.

‘It’s you, Harvey. What have you come for? Why aren’t you in the orchestra?’

‘I’ve come for money, Brewster,’ replied the other. ‘The band won’t play unless they get some money.’

‘Why, they had money last night,’ retorted the official. ‘I gave you five pounds last night.’

‘My dear Brewster,’ answered Harvey, ‘what’s the good of five pounds? You owe them nearly ninety. What’s the good of five pounds among twenty-three men. I’ve not asked a farthing for myself, and I want it badly enough, God knows! I have a sick wife at home, and one of my children is laid up as well; but that don’t matter. The men say they won’t play unless they get something.’

‘Come in!’ growled the business-manager; ‘don’t let’s talk about these things out here where

we can be overheard. This is getting too awful ! And how much do you want ?

‘Well, I hardly know,’ stammered the conductor of the orchestra. ‘I really can’t say. You must give me whatever you can, and as much as you can.’

‘I’ll do what’s possible. I’ll try to make it another five pounds,’ suggested Brewster. ‘I suppose that will pacify them, at any rate.’

‘It will not,’ rejoined the musician sharply. ‘I’m sure it will not. Five pounds will be less than five shillings apiece, and they won’t take that, I’m certain. And you must be in a hurry about it too, because they’re going to ring in the band in a moment, and the men won’t go into the orchestra until they have my assurance that I have some coin.’

‘I’ll remember all this, Harvey, when the next piece comes, and things go all right,’ said Brewster. ‘I know it’s not your fault ; you’ve stuck to us well enough. But there’ll be such a change in this theatre, when things alter, as has never been in it before. I’ll remember those who stood by us and those who worried my life out.’

‘My dear boy,’ retorted the musician, ‘it’s no use

talking like that a bit. You know my feelings on the subject, and I can't blame the men for trying to get the means wherewith to live. They're paid badly enough, Heaven knows! The musician in a theatre gets barely the salary of a utility man, and he must pass through a skilled training to earn that.'

'I'll try and make it ten pounds,' said Brewster; 'but I haven't got it now; you must come to me for it after the first act, when the front money is all in.'

'I have your word that I shall have ten pounds?' asked the conductor.

'You have my word. You shall have ten pounds.'

'Mind you, I'll rely upon you,' retorted the other. 'There'll be a riot if the men are deceived, I'm sure.'

'You will not be deceived,' answered Brewster. 'Come back after the curtain is down for the first act.'

'I wonder who will come and want money next,' he said to himself when Harvey had left. 'I suppose it will go on like that all through the evening. After all, it's only filling in the breach with sand. The whole place is bound to tumble down over our

ears before long, unless help comes from somewhere ; and where it is to come from heaven only knows.'

He sat himself down by his desk, which he opened, and in an abstracted manner fumbled among his papers. At last his wandering fingers found a big, manifoldly-ruled sheet filled with figures. He glanced over it with a searching eye.

'Nearly a thousand pounds wanted to meet the most pressing things, about fifteen hundred for the others. Two thousand five hundred pounds, and every night that God sends we lose between sixty and seventy pounds more. A nice fix to be in ; and Watson doesn't seem in the least to appreciate his position !'

He went to the speaking-tube in the corner of the room, and communicated thereby with the box-office keeper below.

'Leave Dudley in charge of the box-office, and bring up your rough sheets and all the money you have. Bring them up as soon as you can ; I want them.'

'I suppose he has twenty-five pounds with the advance booking,' he went on to himself, 'and that will help a little.'

A furtive knock at the door stopped him in his self-communion.

‘Come in!’ he cried.

A short, round-faced, pug-nosed man entered, his grayish-green eyes twinkled with mischief; an unconscious grin sat on his face, and as he walked with short steps, his hands were folded behind his back. He shuffled up to Brewster’s desk, and then, bending over, made a great pretence of secrecy, and whispered :

‘Mr. Watson wants you to send him down five-and-twenty pounds.’

That said, he produced from behind his back a folded note, which, with ceremonious flourish and bow, he handed to the business-manager.

‘My dear Brewster,’ it ran, ‘please give my dresser five-and-twenty pounds. He has got my instructions what to do with it.’

‘And what are you supposed to do with it, Masters?’ asked the big man in a ponderous despair.

‘I don’t mind telling you, Mr. Brewster,’ whispered the little man in a confidential undertone : ‘I’m to take it to Miss Northcote’s dressing-room.’

‘That’s too bad, by Jove!’ cried Brewster. ‘Mr. Watson isn’t on the stage yet, is he?’ he asked.

‘No, he isn’t going on for ten minutes yet,’ replied the dresser.

‘Tell him I’ll be down to see him in a moment.’

‘But the money, the money?’ inquired the little man.

‘I’ll see Mr. Watson about that. You go and take him my message,’ was the answer.

Mr. Randolph Waithbraite Watson, comedian and manager of the Royal Charing Cross Theatre, was a tall, slim, but elegantly-built man, with wavy hair of that naturally reddish auburn which foolish women strive so hard to imitate by dyes. He had pleasant, clear-cut features which his friends termed classic, and which he himself was proud to compare with the lithographic and engraved portraits of Lord Byron. Admirers found in his lineaments a resemblance to Shelley as well; others went so far as to discover in that massive brow, in those firm-set lips, and that slightly-aquiline nose, the makings of a head of Shakespeare—and this generally happened when the great comedian wore the costume of the Elizabethan period. Just then he was playing the part of the glorious bachelor

of 'Much Ado about Nothing,' and those same friends vowed him the very picture of Benedick as limned by their imaginings. It all depended upon the part the popular actor was impersonating on the stage. He was a handsome man—there was no doubt about that; and his flatterers had ample basis for their adulations. His movements, which had been naturally graceful, had become studied and slightly artificial through long habit of the theatre, and he spoiled an otherwise polished and distinguished manner by little tricks of vanity which were nearly feminine in their triviality.

Mr. Watson's dressing-room was situated on the stage level. It was a comfortable and cosy apartment, divided into two portions by a set of heavy brownish-green velvet curtains, the inner part being the actor's sanctum, and devoted to the actual dressing, the outer division remaining reserved for the visits of friends and other persons who had dealings with him while he was engaged upon his nightly duties. Photographs of well-known actors and actresses, mezzotint portraits of Peg Woffington and of David Garrick, another of Edmund Kean, and the well-known engraving of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, after Sir Joshua Reynolds, adorned

the walls. There was an abundance of mirrors; a large-framed cheval-glass stood in one corner, opposite it a big mirror occupied the whole side of the wall; a little way beyond, a trifold-glass glittered below a big, double, universal-jointed gaslight. The couch, seats, and chairs about the room were upholstered with the same brownish-green velvet which had furnished material for the curtains. On the marble slab of the gilt console-table in one corner stood a vase containing a freshly-cut bouquet, and a faded, huge laurel-wreath, the big ribbons inscribed with the gilded words: 'To Randolph Watson, His many admirers,' was suspended on the wall by its side.

The comedian was dressed ready for his part of Benedick when Brewster entered the room. He had played the *rôle* fully hundreds of times, yet he was repeating the lines to himself in a mechanical, matter-of-fact manner as he was walking up and down the place. Brewster stood still for a moment, and then ejaculated a discreet cough.

'Oh, it's you, Brewster!' said the manager; 'and what's up now? Why didn't you give Masters the money?'

'I didn't give Masters the money,' replied the

business-manager, 'for the simple reason that I can't give it to him.'

'Can't?' asked Watson; 'why can't you? Isn't there five-and-twenty pounds in the house?'

'Yes,' was the retort, rather bitterly expressed, 'there is five - and - twenty pounds in the house. There's even forty-three pounds six shillings and sixpence in the house, but ten pounds and sixpence of that is "libraries."'

'Goodness gracious!' exclaimed the actor-manager, 'only forty-three pounds in the whole house?'

'That's all,' Brewster went on, in a tone of acerbity. 'I've just taken the first return. Six pounds eight in the pit, seven pounds thirteen in the gallery, nineteen pounds five in front, and ten pounds and sixpence libraries, making altogether forty-three pounds six shillings and sixpence. There's thirty-three pounds six in cash, and in addition to that Bentley has two pounds fifteen advance booking, making altogether thirty - six pounds in money.'

'Well,' exclaimed the comedian, 'if you have thirty-six pounds, why couldn't you send five-and-twenty?'

‘The reason is very simple,’ answered the big man. ‘I’ve paid out of that ten pounds to the supers. Carter came and told me that they would strike and refuse to go on if I didn’t send them some money; and Harvey has been to me just now and insisted upon having ten pounds, or the band would not go into the orchestra. I’ve given my word that I would send them the money after the first act—that leaves only sixteen pounds. Nearly five pounds of that will be wanted for the advertisements in the dailies.’

‘What!’ cried the manager, ‘do you mean to say that Smith has broken his contract?’

‘No; he has not broken his contract,’ replied Brewster. ‘We have broken ours by not paying him; and now we have to send our own advertisements to the papers nightly, and pay cash. We can’t blame the man; we owe him nearly four hundred pounds, and he says he won’t go any further. I shall have about fifteen or sixteen pounds left when all’s said and done; and Heaven only knows what calls will come on me for that before the night’s over!’

‘But I must have the five-and-twenty pounds by hook or by crook,’ said Watson desperately; ‘I

have promised Miss Northcote that she should have it.'

'She simply can't have it. You can't get blood from a stone,' said Brewster. 'She's well off enough to wait—let her wait.'

'She says she won't wait, and that if she does not get her money, she will not go on; and it doesn't matter much who keeps the curtain down, whether it is the supers, the orchestra, or the leading lady.'

'I don't think, Watson,' said the business-manager, drawing a heavy breath, 'that Miss Northcote will refuse to go on. She knows there is an understudy ready. I have given my word to Harvey that the orchestra shall have ten pounds, and my word is yours; we can't break that. I'll send Miss Northcote whatever money I have at my disposal when the curtain goes down, and that's as much as I can do.'

'I heard what you said!' exclaimed a lady, who had unperceivedly entered the room. 'I am not to have my money, then?'

She was a handsome woman of imperious stature and manner, with cold, passionless eyes, thin lips, and a round, nearly doll-like face, crowned by a

shock of glossy dark hair. The costume of Beatrice sat well on her robust figure, and gave her an air of stateliness.

‘You shall have whatever is possible, Miss Northcote,’ answered Brewster; ‘more than that no man can do.’

‘But you owe me over a hundred pounds, Mr. Watson; and I’ll not go on in this sort of way any longer! I know better, of course, than to disgrace myself while the audience are in the house; but if to-night I do not get at least a substantial instalment of the money due to me, you can look for another Beatrice to-morrow.’

With that she swept from the room. At that moment the noise of a tumult, coming from the stage, reached the ears of the two men. Voices raised in anger were distinguishable where silence ought to have reigned.

‘What in Heaven’s name is the matter now?’ cried Watson, as his dresser rushed into the room.

‘It’s the carpenters and property-men that have struck,’ replied Masters. ‘They’ve heard that the supers have had some money, and they won’t let the curtain go up before they are paid in their turn.’

‘You had better go on the stage, Watson, and say a few words to them. They’ll pay attention to you, if to nobody else,’ suggested the business-manager. ‘I’ll run round in the meantime and see what can be scraped together. The curtain must, of course, go up, if we have to pawn our watches to see it through.’

With that he rushed away towards the front of the house.

‘Run away, my friend, and pawn *your* watch if you like, but not mine,’ muttered the comedian. ‘I’ve had about enough of this, and I don’t intend to be left altogether naked in the street. I’ll cut this Gordian knot after my own fashion.’

He strolled leisurely on to the stage. Groups of excited men in working dress were vociferating angrily and loudly. They stepped aside to let their employer pass.

‘Here’s the governor himself!’ cried one of the stage hands. ‘Stand together like men! Make no bones about it, and tell him that we mean to have our rights!’

‘All right, my good man,’ replied the manager. ‘You shall have your rights. But the audience must have theirs first of all. Come to my dress-

ing-room all of you when the stage is set for the second act. I will talk to you. But now,' he added, in a tone of command that was not to be misunderstood, 'I'll have no nonsense! Clear the stage! Clear it, all of you, this instant!'

The spirit of discipline courageously appealed to was easily victorious. There was a scampering of many feet, and in another moment the stage was empty though the wings were crowded.

'Now ring up sharp!' cried Watson, and the curtain rose and disclosed to the audience the first set of 'Much Ado about Nothing.'

II.

MR. EDWARD BREWSTER, though nominally the business-manager of the Royal Charing Cross Theatre, was virtually a partner. He owned a one-third share and interest in the lease and business of the theatre, and in that one-third share he had invested all his worldly possessions. He had originally been in the army, and had after that successively and equally unsuccessfully tried the Bar, civil engineering, and financing. Like most men about town, he had a hearty liking for the theatre, and was thus drawn towards his present occupation. He was a sharp, shrewd man of the world, who had served in a hard school, and was therefore well suited for the post which he filled. To him the failure of the existing management of the Charing Cross Theatre meant temporary ruin. He would have to go out into the world and commence anew; perhaps he would have to take the

acting or business management of some country theatre or touring company. Positions in town like the one he occupied were scarce, and to men without capital nearly unobtainable. When he had reached the dress-circle lobby he was quite out of breath, and he walked slowly towards his office, looking neither to the right nor to the left, with his hands behind his back, and his hat set at the back of his head.

The box-office keeper was waiting for him at the door of his office.

‘Mr. Miller is downstairs,’ said the man, ‘and wants to see you particularly.’

‘What a bore that man is!’ exclaimed Brewster; ‘and just now of all evenings in the year! Give me your money and your sheet; I’ll check them by-and-by. Where’s Mr. Miller?’

‘He’s in the stall-bar at the present moment,’ replied the box-office keeper. ‘Shall I send him up to you?’

‘Yes,’ answered Brewster, ‘you had better do so. I’ll get rid of him, and then go on with my work. This act plays forty-five minutes, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the man, and went out.

‘Forty-five minutes’ breathing-time,’ Brewster

muttered to himself—‘forty-five minutes’ respite. It isn’t very long, and if we get through this night all right it will be a miracle.’

He sat himself down by his open desk and counted the money that the box-office keeper had left, and compared the amount with the figures on the sheet before him. He made a great and brave display of the jingling coin and of the two five-pound notes which were among them, when a tall, pale-faced, fair-haired, blue-eyed man entered the room.

He might have been five or six and thirty, and his face bore a diffident smile. He was dressed in the perfection of the tailor’s art. In one hand he carried a glossy hat, while with the other he held to his lips a tasselled and silver-headed cane. A monocle was stuck in one eye, the lips were half open and showed a row of uneven and rebellious teeth.

‘Oh, I hope I am not interrupting you, Brewster,’ he lisped. ‘I shall be very sorry if I am interrupting you.’

‘Don’t mention it—pray, don’t mention it; I’m always pleased to see you,’ rejoined Brewster, scattering the sixpences and shillings and half-

crowns of one paper-bag on to the desk and counting them energetically in the intervals between his phrases. 'You don't mind me going on with my business while I am speaking to you. I can talk and do this sort of thing at the same time.'

Mr. Miller's eyes followed the movements of the business-manager with avidity.

'How nice it is to be engaged in a theatre!' he said. 'How pleasant it must be! Nothing to do but to amuse yourself and to count money.'

'Nothing much, oh dear!' retorted Brewster with a smile. 'Don't think it's always like that. I don't say that we haven't our share of the good things, but there are times when we have to work hard, you know—downright hard, my boy;' and the broad, heavy, fat hand came down with a slap on the tall man's thin and bony knee.

The eyeglass bounced from its accustomed place, and Miller put aside his stick and rubbed his trousers as if trying to coax them into smooth order.

'You are strong, Brewster,' he said with a laugh that had no gaiety in it. 'You are enthusiastic in your expressions. That's always the way with you theatrical people. You live amidst so much excite-

ment that a little extra forcibleness comes natural to you.'

Brewster by that time had counted the small piles over and over again, and having got tired of the show he was making of the theatre's tiny treasury, he turned round in his revolving writing-chair and faced his visitor.

'Well, Miller,' he said, 'my box-office keeper told me that you wanted to speak to me particularly. What have you got to say? I am waiting to listen. Out with it, my boy.'

Under this direct attack of question the tall, thin man shrank back in his chair, and, pursing his lips while he stroked his chin with one hand, he hummed and hawed for the space of a few seconds.

'Well, I hardly know,' he stammered. 'I don't quite know that it is my business, but I thought I'd come and ask you, because, if there is a chance——'

'A chance of what?' interrupted Brewster. 'What are you talking about?'

A faint gleam of hope shone across his darkness. Herbert Winthrop Miller was rich. He was a nephew of one of the partners in the famous

banking firm of Castor, Dundas, Miller, and Co. He was a particular friend of Mr. Barnaby Walker, the great dramatic critic, and in company with that gentleman had been several times ‘suspected’ of dabbling in theatrical speculations. Here was a man who could help if he only would.

‘I was in the City to-day,’ replied Miller hesitatingly, ‘and I heard there that you were looking for a partner.’

The ponderous business-manager had, by dint of severe schooling, become a finished comedian. As a matter of fact, he had hunted all through the City that day, and through the West-End too, for the purpose of raising money by hook or by crook. He had offered exorbitant interest for the discount of bills. He had tried to mortgage the lease, he had endeavoured to raise money by the sale of a share in the profits and business of the theatre, and in all of these attempts he had equally and signally failed. The lease was declared to be not valuable property, but an encumbrance; of profits he could show none, the signatures of himself and his partner were absolutely undiscountable. He was not a naturally untruthful or dishonest man, but he had moved for months in an atmosphere of

deception. His theatre had for some time past been steadily going towards ruin. He had been forced—reluctantly at first, and then with less repentance—to resort to fiction when supposed to be stating facts about Mr. Randolph Watson's management. Papered houses, exaggerated takings, tradesmen's claims to be delayed, and the like, had all combined to dull his inborn sense of truthfulness, until at last he had come to look upon lying merely as business, as a sort of comedy to be played for his and his partner's profit. By that he meant no more to act dishonestly than the tradesman who praises, say, a faded pair of curtains. Here was a bird ready to be ensnared, and when a bird of his own accord entered the net, he deserved—according to Mr. Brewster's theories of natural economy—to be made to pay dearly for his rashness.

‘I? A partner?’ he exclaimed in a tone of well-assumed surprise. ‘My dear boy, what are you talking about? A partner where?’

‘For this theatre, of course!’ answered the young man, taken rather aback. ‘Huntingdon, my broker, told me, and he never says anything but what he knows to be a fact.’

The hand that was to drag Messrs. Watson and Co. out of the mire was ready for the work. It only required gentle and skilful treatment and it would shower its gold.

‘What nonsense, my boy!’ retorted Brewster. ‘Why should I want a partner? This is one of the most popular theatres in London, and at times we have taken as much as two thousand pounds a week in this place.’

Miller had not moved long enough among theatrical men to be well informed about the financial position of the Charing Cross management. He had heard rumours that they ‘were in Queer Street,’ as his acquaintances called it; but he had no idea of the depth of the gulf into which they were tumbling headlong. Yet he knew that Brewster’s statement was a barefaced exaggeration.

‘Yes, at times,’ replied Miller with a nearly imperceptible sneer; ‘but I don’t think you are taking two thousand pounds a week now.’

‘No,’ replied the big man, with a slight shrug of the shoulder and a manner of feeble straightforwardness, ‘we are not taking two thousand a week; that’s the truth. But that is no reason why people should spread rumours that we want to

get rid of a share in the theatre. I don't mind telling you we want money for the next production, which is to be very big, something that will astonish the natives, you know, my dear boy ; but we can raise that at any time by paying bank interest.'

The bird became scared lest the poacher should not feel inclined to snare him.

'Well, I don't know how it's got about,' said Miller rather despairingly, 'and I don't know whether it's true or not ; but there is a rumour all through the clubs that you are not doing as well as you appear to be.'

'My boy, what nonsense !' answered Brewster. 'People always will meddle with things that don't concern them. I don't say that Watson and myself might not take a partner if the conditions were very favourable, for naturally we prefer to get up the next piece with our own money instead of having to go into the City for it ; but that is no reason for stating that we are hunting for a partner. The terms would have to be very easy indeed.'

'I am not very particular,' answered Miller rather mournfully ; 'as long as I get some return

for my money I don't mind. I have more than enough to live on, and I won't bother myself much about the profits.'

The bird was fast settling down on the snare. Here was a rescue at last ; here was the man who was able to fill the big breach with his gold, the breach through which the torrent of disaster was sweeping at that very moment, and threatening to drag with it the whole structure of the Charing Cross management.

'And then, you know,' Brewster went on, 'you're not accustomed to theatrical management, and you would be of very little service here. Don't you imagine that a theatrical manager's life is a bed of roses. You'd soon get tired of it. Be warned, my boy ; you have plenty of other means of investing your money ; take my word, you are better out of the theatre.'

A knock at the door roused him to a sense of his outer surroundings.

'Come in !' he cried in a tone of anger.

One of the dress-circle attendants entered. His face was pale, and he rubbed his hands against one another excitedly.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered ; 'I am sorry

for interrupting you, Mr. Brewster—but—but—but——’

Brewster perceived immediately that something was wrong.

‘Wait outside,’ he said; ‘I’ll come to you in a minute.—Somebody ill in the stalls, I suppose,’ he continued, turning to his visitor whilst the man left the room, ‘or a row in the gallery. That, you see, is one of the bothers of a manager’s existence. People expect him to look after these things himself. Every single soul in the audience thinks that he has a claim upon him. I shan’t keep you long,’ he added, closing his desk without locking it; ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

He rushed out into the passage.

‘What’s the matter?’ he whispered to the attendant, who was waiting for him. ‘Speak quietly; I don’t want to be overheard by that man in there.’

‘There’s a riot at the back of the stage,’ said the man.

‘A riot? Where, for God’s sake?’ questioned the business-manager.

‘In the carpenters’ shop and in the supers’ room. The men are fighting. Some of them

called the others "blacklegs," and said that they ought not to have allowed the curtain to go up before they were paid, and so they came from words to blows. The master carpenter's had his head cut open.'

'Does Mr. Watson know of this?' asked Brewster.

'I think he does,' the man replied. 'Masters came to me and asked me to run to you.'

'Wait here a moment,' replied the big man, 'and I'll tell you what to do.'

He strolled with leisurely step back into his office.

'It's what I expected,' he said; 'a row. What nonsense to worry me with it! I have something else to attend to at the same time. You don't mind waiting for a moment?'

'Oh dear no,' answered Miller; 'I'll wait as long as you like.'

Brewster went to his desk and collected all the money that was there. He counted it, and placed it in a strong paper bag; then he wrote on a scrap of paper:

'MY DEAR WATSON,—I have a man here who may save us. I send you all the money there is in

the place. Do the best you can with that, and perhaps before the evening is out I may have more; but, for Heaven's sake, gain time, and see that the audience learns nothing about the state of our affairs.'

Having scribbled that, and enclosed it in an envelope, he went out into the lobby again, and gave both the bag of money and the note to the attendant.

'Take this to Masters,' he said, 'immediately. When you have done that, get the policemen from the pit, and from the gallery, and from the front, and take them to Mr. Watson on the stage. He'll tell them what to do.'

A haggard smile played over his face as he re-entered the room, locked his door, and seated himself at his desk.

'I shall not allow myself to be interrupted again, Miller,' he said. 'Now we can talk a little more at our leisure.'

His fingers twitched nervously, while he played in a careless manner with his watch-chain.

'And how much do you think,' he continued, 'that, say, a quarter share in this theatre is worth?'

‘I don’t want a share in the theatre,’ replied Miller pointedly, ‘either in its responsibilities or in its management. I want to be a sort of sleeping-partner. I’ll advance so much money, and in return for that, if there are any profits, I’ll take a certain share of them.’

‘Oh,’ exclaimed Brewster, ‘you don’t want to take any risk?’

‘Not if I can help it. Nothing beyond the money I advance,’ was the ready reply.

‘But supposing the money invested were lost, what then?’ asked the business-manager.

‘Well, it would be awkward,’ answered the young man; ‘but I suppose if it were lost it couldn’t be helped.’

‘You are willing to go as far as that, then?’ asked the business-manager. He drew his armchair closer to his visitor. ‘I can see through it, my dear Miller,’ he said; ‘there’s a lady in the case.’

The blue-eyed man dropped his eyeglass again, and endeavoured by a fierce fight with the obstreperous object to gain breathing-time, and to recover from the surprise of the assault.

‘Well, I don’t mind saying,’ he replied at last, ‘there is a lady in the case.’

‘I guessed so,’ retorted the other. ‘There’s always some lady or other in a case of this kind. I never have known a man who wanted to go into a theatre yet, or into a partnership in a theatre, who hadn’t a lady to push on. Who is the young person, if you please?’

‘You needn’t be afraid about her,’ answered Miller; ‘she is well worth being pushed on. She’s as clever as she is pretty, and as pretty as she is clever.’

‘That’s rather comparative, isn’t it, Miller?’ suggested the man of business. ‘She may be neither, for all we know. I’ll be a judge of that when I see her. What’s her name?’

‘Her name is Sybil Collier,’ replied the visitor.

‘Ahem! ahem!’ grunted Brewster. ‘Sybil Collier! I think I’ve heard her name, but I don’t know much about her. Well, I dare say you have a photograph of her about you?’

‘I haven’t, to tell you the truth; but I’ve better than that. The young lady herself is in the stalls, and I’ll bring her up to you, if you like.’

He rose, as if he intended to leave.

‘Stop a minute,’ Brewster went on. ‘Before we go as far as that I should like to know how much

you are willing to invest. I suppose you won't object to six or seven thousand ?'

'Oh, Jeminy!' was the startling answer. 'Six or seven thousand ! I thought two or three at the outside.'

'What's the good of that, my dear boy?' snarled Brewster. 'Two or three thousand ! If the young lady whom you desire to push on makes a failure in the piece that is got up for her, we shall lose that in the production and the first week or two. You'll have to spring rather more than that.'

'Well, we'll talk about that when I come back,' said the tall young man. 'I won't mind a trifle if I can get a proper position and a proper opening for Miss Collier. You'll like her when you see her, I'm sure.'

Loud and repeated knocks at the door startled both men.

'Please, Mr. Brewster—Mr. Brewster !' exclaimed an excited voice outside.

Brewster recognised the voice. He rushed to the door. Masters was standing there in a state of trepidation. All the twinkle of humour had gone out of the usually so jovial little round face.

'For God's sake, come round !' he cried, whilst

the business-manager made desperate secret signs to induce him to stop. 'They're all crying for money. The governor has given them all you sent, and it hasn't gone half round. They haven't started to set the scene, and the curtain's been down over ten minutes already.'

'Speak more quietly,' whispered Brewster. 'I can do no good if I come round with empty hands.'

Miller had overheard the conversation, in spite of the business-manager's efforts to reduce it to whispers. He had risen, and stood in the centre of the room with his hands in his waistcoat-pocket, as if fumbling for something hidden there.

'Come, Brewster,' he said, in a tone of quiet determination, 'why don't you own up? Why don't you confess that you are deucedly in want of money this instant? It'll save a lot of bother.'

The situation was desperate. Money had to be found at once, or there would be a scandal. The whole town would ring with the news that the Charing Cross supers and workmen had struck because they had not been paid. Pretended friends would smile and presume to pity, and enemies would sneer and rail, and say, 'I told you; it was bound to come.'

‘Well, and if I own up,’ retorted the man of business viciously, ‘what then? Have you a hundred pounds about you?’

For all answer Miller emptied his pockets and his purse. Some thirty odd sovereigns rang on Brewster’s desk. Then he pulled out his pocket-book, and laid half a dozen notes by the side of the gold.

‘Take that to go on with,’ he said.

Brewster gripped his hand and shook it heartily. Then swiftly, without counting it, he gathered up the money and rushed out.

The Charing Cross Theatre management was saved.

III.

WHILE the fate of the Charing Cross management was trembling in the balance, a young lady sat in the stalls of the theatre to whom the success or failure of Mr. Herbert Winthrop Miller's negotiations was a matter of great moment. When Mr. Miller had enthusiastically stated that Miss Sybil Collier was as clever as she was pretty, he had meant to use not the comparative but the superlative; and if he had employed the superlative degree, he would not have been greatly exaggerating. Miss Sybil Collier was, if not already a beauty, certainly likely to become one of the handsomest women of her time. She was very young yet—one might have taken her to be eighteen or nineteen, although more than twenty summers had passed over her pretty head.

The stall next to her was vacant; and the fact

that she was thus unchaperoned was taken advantage of by male and female scrutinizers, who, during the prolonged interval between the acts, examined Miss Collier's personality with that unabashed rudeness of which fashionable theatre-goers claim the privilege. It must be admitted that the criticism was universally favourable—and it could not well have been otherwise. Her plush opera-cloak had fallen from her shoulders, and afforded to the greedy eyes of her male surroundings a liberal display of creamy translucent skin, velvety as a peach. Her shoulders flashed white against the black satin and jet of her dress. Her face, saucy, smiling, and round, was lit up by a pair of bright, coal-black eyes—not very large, but sparkling with a dreamy sheen. Her eyebrows were as delicately pencilled as if they had been painted, which they were not. Her thin lips, slightly parted by a smile, showed a set of teeth perfect and white as milk. Her black gloves, which reached above the elbow, revealed enough of the dimpled arms to make a sculptor envious. Her hair was of that peculiar colour for which no exact definition can be found; it was neither brown nor fair, and it glistened with the

reflections of the lights that shone upon it—auburn, golden, and bronze. In figure she was slight; and as she reclined in her stall, most men argued that she was likely to be tall.

Her eyes were wandering, as if unconsciously, all over the theatre, unconcerned by the staring looks that converged upon her, that followed her every movement, and would have made any young lady less accustomed to the public gaze decidedly uncomfortable, if not miserable. Miss Sybil Collier, however, had been inured to public and private admiration ever since she had been a child. She came from a theatrical family, and had been carried on the stage when a mere baby by her mother. She had played children's parts from the time she was six years old, and ingénues and chamber-maids from the day she was fourteen. In provincial theatricals she was decidedly well known. She had played every part in the legitimate repertory that a young woman could play, from the Prince of Wales in 'Richard III.,' to Julia in the 'Hunchback' and Pauline in the 'Lady of Lyons.' She had undertaken them all with very fair success. She had friends who were enthusiastic about her eventual success on the

metropolitan stage, and who vowed that she had only to appear to be able to repeat Cæsar's phrase, with the well-known alteration, 'I came, I was seen, and I conquered.'

Whatever her victories in the provinces had been, in London theatricals she was a nonentity. She had never played in the metropolis, and even a man so well versed in the theatrical nomenclature of his day as Mr. Edward Brewster, knew nothing of Miss Sybil Collier's name or fame. The first act of 'Much Ado about Nothing' was played, and after an unusually prolonged interval, the second, and the third, and the fourth, and Mr. Herbert Winthrop Miller had not yet made his appearance by the side of his fair protégée. Just as the curtain had gone down at the end of the fourth act, he appeared at the stall-door, hat in hand, and sliding, more than walking, to his vacant stall by Miss Collier's side, he said :

'I have kept you waiting a long while, my dear Miss Collier, but if I have kept you, it is because I employed the time I was away to further your interests. You won't scold me, will you ?'

'I won't scold you, Mr. Miller, if you have got me an engagement,' replied the young enchantress.

‘A good one I mean, of course; not an understudy, or something of that kind.’

‘What would you say,’ retorted the young man, his porcelain-blue eyes resting greedily on his charming neighbour, ‘what would you say to playing Beatrice?’

‘Beatrice in “Much Ado about Nothing”?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Beatrice in “Much Ado about Nothing.”’

‘Where?’

‘Here, in this theatre.’

The young lady opened her eyes wide.

‘Now, Mr. Miller, you are teasing me. That is too bad. I have not deserved it.’

‘I asked what you would say to playing Beatrice in this very theatre,’ repeated the young man. The defiant smile of victory on his face told Sybil that he was most likely in earnest.

‘If you had obtained an engagement for me to play Beatrice in this theatre,’ she said, ‘I should tell you that you are very good and kind and nice, and that I like you very much. But I don’t believe a word of it, Mr. Miller.’

‘There are people looking at us and listening to us,’ he whispered. ‘Would you mind putting on

your cloak and following me? I want you to come upstairs with me to Mr. Brewster's office.'

As Sybil rose, her tall slender figure, in its flashing black dress, standing out in all its grace amid the deep red of the stalls and the pale tints of the dresses of the ladies who surrounded her, a murmur of admiration rose above the hubbub of the general conversation, and Miller felt proud indeed as the cavalier of so fair a lady.

He was not a very quick-witted man, but he was possessed of a goodly fund of common-sense, and he was a gentleman. Like most young men of means who were flung into the vortex of life in town after leaving Oxford, he had gone the pace for a year or two, but had been wise enough to pull up sharp in his career of wanton extravagance before his prospects were materially injured. He could well afford to spend a few thousands, or even more, to gratify a feeling of friendship, or to further the cause of anybody whose success interested him; and in his negotiations with Brewster he had not in any way gone beyond the means his income afforded him.

In the case of Sybil Collier, however, he would have been glad to stake far more than his present

risk. He had been introduced to the young actress one night when she was playing at the Theatre Royal, Manchester, and had fallen in love with her on the spot. He had been accustomed to hear actresses spoken about with but slight deference, nearly as objects to be bought—the only question being the price ; and he was roughly and, it must be confessed, not unpleasantly awakened from that delusion by finding that no money, no gift, no flattery, no enticement he could offer could buy Sybil or cause her to deviate even an inch from the straight path which an honest woman follows. But he was not easily baffled. He was rather glad that the prize he had set his heart upon was so much more valuable than he had deemed it, and from that moment forward he set to work in homely, earnest fashion to woo Sybil Collier.

There are those who assert that in these days of end-of-century depravity, no young man of good family habitually associates with an actress unless it be with an object at the bare mention of which Mrs. Grundy would hold up her hands in pious horror. They are mistaken.

Sybil had been brought up by a homely, kindly mother, who had been left a widow early in her

twenties, and who had luckily been able to give her daughter the comforts and education which children of actors, who have to travel about the country, seldom obtain. Sybil's earnings and those of her mother rendered them independent of outside support, and although the good lady did not altogether approve of young Miller's courtship, she knew her daughter to be possessed of sufficient shrewdness and sense of right to feel no uneasiness about her conduct. She was firmly settled in her belief that Sybil was destined to become one of the brightest fixed stars of the theatrical firmament, and openly expressed her opinion that a marriage, even coupled with the advantages Mr. Miller could offer, would rather detract than advance her daughter's prospects. Money was very well in its way, but money and fame combined were better. As for Miller, he was, at the time of our present history, Sybil's devoted slave, an anxious attendant upon her slightest wish, glad if he could anticipate her most trivial desire. He loved her, and he loved her sincerely, and *pour le bon motif*, as our Gallic neighbours have it.

Brewster was sitting by his desk in a far happier mood than but a short while ago, and, accustomed

as he was to see some of the handsomest women of the day parade for his approval, he could not withhold a faint cry of pleasurable surprise as Sybil entered his room.

‘So that is the young lady?’ he said, his little eyes travelling over Sybil from her wavy hair to her tiny shoes. ‘She will do as far as looks go. Watson will soon find out what she can do on the stage. I’ll take you round to him, and he will see you the moment the curtain is down. That’s the way we settle this kind of business,’ he added, exhibiting to Miller two small sheets of paper. ‘That will put an end to all the difficulty, and Miss Collier will have a clear start. Look at them, read them, my boy!’

He handed the papers to Miller.

‘The run of “Much Ado about Nothing” at this theatre,’ one of them ran, ‘will end on Saturday, November 29 next, when all engagements for the run of the piece will cease and determine.’

‘The autumn season at this theatre,’ stated the other, ‘will end on Saturday, November 29 next, when all engagements for the season, or at the usual notice, and all engagements of workmen, employés, and all contracts for advertisements, will

cease and determine. All persons desiring re-engagements or renewals of contracts are requested to apply to Mr. Brewster.'

'I shall be very sorry indeed if anybody is deprived of employment on my account,' said Sybil, who had been glancing over Miller's shoulder. 'In fact, I should not care to enter a theatre under such circumstances.'

'My dear Miss Collier,' remonstrated Brewster, 'don't trouble your pretty head about that. Nobody will be hurt on your account. You can make your mind easy on that subject. They will suffer simply for their own shortcomings.'

He was a martinet, and he did not for a second admit that there was a shadow of right on the side of the men who had clamoured, with unreasonable vehemence, and at an unreasonable time, it is true, for that which was justly due to them. He considered that these people ought to be grateful to the Charing Cross management for being employed at all in these hard times—even at the diminutive wage which most of them received. Their conduct was worse than rebellious; it was ungrateful.

And in the main there was a spice of salutary

cautiousness in his act. Spite and malice have, over and over again, found dangerous vents in theatres. The discharge of a friend, of a brother, of a sweetheart, has been known—though not always proved—to be the initial cause of a heavy weight being dropped—by accident, of course—from the flies, of guide-lines and ropes being cut, of traps being left unsecured, of bridges being left treacherously open, and of a score of kinds of like contemptible, and sometimes homicidal, revenges. There is a phrase known to and used among actors who certainly, from an educational standpoint, ought to be removed from the petty meanness which sometimes influences the super or carpenter. It is ‘burking his or her business,’ and it consists in the malicious endeavours to injure the reputation or position in the theatre of an actor or actress by not finishing the sentences according to the text, by omitting them or altering them or the business of the stage in such a way that the reply is rendered ineffective, and then pretending by dumb movements, which the audience would notice, that the injured party is the person at fault. Great actors and actresses, men and women of genius, have been known to stoop to

such conduct. Edward Brewster was, therefore, perhaps right when, on the introduction of a new candidate for fame and favour, he said that he meant to give her 'a clear start.'

'Come with me, Miss Collier,' he said smilingly, 'and you shall be shown into a London manager's dressing-room. You are not afraid, I suppose?'

'Not a little wee bit,' she answered archly. 'Not in the least, I assure you.'

She tripped out into the passage, followed by the two men.

Brewster with his key opened the pass-door, and they descended to the stage level by one of those dingy ill-lit staircases that are so frequently found on the actors' side of the best-managed of London theatres. The supers and workmen were standing about in little knots discussing in undertones the altered state of affairs, and wondering whence had come the money which had been distributed among them. All signs of insubordination had disappeared. 'The ghost had walked,' and they had been promised a settlement of all further claims on the morrow. The only sentiment predominant among them now was the fear that their rough and disorderly manner of attempting to enforce

payment might lead to the loss of their employment. They made way respectfully for Sybil and the two gentlemen, staring with good-natured, humble admiration at the lady. They one and all voted her 'a ripper,' 'a stunner,' and the like.

Little Masters, his eyes twinkling again with some of their wonted lustre, smiling his broadest, and rubbing his hands in a glee of devoted thankfulness that the impending catastrophe had been averted, stood at the dressing-room door bowing with a stagey courtliness which would have done credit to a burlesque comedian.

'Please to walk in,' he said, holding aside the velvet curtains that were draped behind the door; 'Mr. Watson will be here nearly immediately.'

Sybil seated herself in a cosy armchair, and with an admiring gaze contemplated the signs of comfort and of luxury with which the room abounded. She compared in her mind this little palace of a dressing-room with the dingy cells to which actors and actresses are relegated in the provinces—tiny rooms mostly, where chill and ghastly draughts take the place of ventilation, where the dust of ages is to be found in the cracks and corners of

benches, tables, and chairs; and she argued to herself that London artistes were indeed the favourites of Fortune if this sumptuous apartment were a criterion of the accommodation provided for them.

The first impression of the surroundings being favourable, she was, in her enthusiastic little heart, prepared to admire the owner of the place at sight.

Mr. Randolph Watson did not keep his visitors long in waiting. He entered the room radiant in the lordly mediæval garb of Benedick, and, with his big expressive eyes beaming with instant and spontaneous appreciation and admiration, he strode to where Miss Collier sat, and, holding out his hand, said in his cheeriest tone :

‘I am glad to see you, Miss Collier. I have heard a great deal about you, and now that I have seen you I feel sure that the praise which has been bestowed upon you is well deserved.’

As a matter of fact he had, before that evening, known no more about Miss Collier than her name; but since Brewster had informed him of the negotiations which he was carrying on with Miller, he had used the intervening time in making inquiries

among his company about Miss Collier's talents and position in the profession. The report had proved a favourable one, and Mr. Randolph Watson did not think it wrong to exaggerate by a little untruth and flattery his knowledge of the young lady's attractions.

Having thus received Miss Collier with open arms, so to say, he turned to Miller and shook his hand with an effusive heartiness.

'*You* are always welcome, Miller,' he said, 'you know that; and when you bring so attractive a person as Miss Collier, you are doubly so. Brewster has told me all about your conversation this evening, and I thoroughly approve all that he has done. We shall have to make a London actress of you, Miss Collier, will we not? We shall get up a new piece, and if everything I have been told about you is true, the part you will play will give you every chance of making a reputation.'

Poor Sybil was taken quite aback by the exuberance of the welcome which she had received. There was surely not another manager in London as nice as Mr. Randolph Watson—why, in all England! Most of the managers she had known were gruff disciplinarians, and even the kindest among them

had never spoken so nicely to her, had never addressed her in such flattering terms as Mr. Watson. She did not wonder now that he was so successful as an actor. How pleasant it must be to act with such a man! Her heart thumped against her ribs in a delightful riot at the expectation of the agreeable excitement in store for her, and her cheeks flushed with a hot flood as she vainly endeavoured to find in her vocabulary an expression of thanks. She could only stammer a few incoherent words; her heart was too full.

Miller stood by her side, wondering whether this mute and visible expression of delight was due simply to the announcement of the big part which would be got ready for her. He had to confess to himself that he was a trifle jealous—‘most unreasonably jealous,’ he added to himself; but it annoyed him to see his lady-love take such pleasure in Watson’s manner and address.

‘This is all nonsense!’ he said to himself. ‘I shall have to get accustomed to it, that’s all.’

He found it very difficult, however, for the moment, at any rate, to school himself even to the first rudiments of callousness as far as the intercourse between Sybil and Watson was concerned. He

knew the manager's reputation as that of a lady-killer. Bevy of fair dames were supposed to be kneeling at his feet in perpetual adoration, and he was afraid lest his Sybil might fall a victim to the actor-manager's blandishments. He was glad when the brief interview was over, and an appointment was made for Miss Collier and himself to come to the theatre on the morrow to conclude the negotiations in a business-like and legal form.

'That's a devilishly handsome girl!' said Watson to his partner and business-manager when the pair had left his room. 'I think I shall be able to mould her to suit my purpose.'

'Don't you mould her too much to suit your purpose,' said Brewster rather pointedly. 'That man Miller is worth gold to us, and the girl is engaged to be married to him.'

'I don't know what you are talking about, Brewster!' retorted the comedian. 'You are always speaking in riddles.'

'Oh, of course I am!' answered Brewster. 'You don't understand me? Well, I will speak plainly. Try to get a lot of business and as little pleasure as possible out of Miss Collier's engagement. It will be far more profitable to both of us.'

‘All right, old man,’ replied Watson. ‘To hear you talk one would think me a Lothario.’

Notwithstanding this strenuous assertion, Watson sat in his chair for some little time after his business-manager had left his room, making no attempt to divest himself of his stage-dress, smiling complacently, and rubbing his hands on his knees in chuckling glee.

‘She’s a very nice girl,’ he said to himself—‘a very nice girl. I wonder whether she is destined to adorn a niche in my gallery of beauties. Who knows? Nobody can tell. That Miller is an ass; he is not worth his luck, not by a long shot.’

Miss Sybil, on the other hand, was nearly taciturn during the earlier portion of the long ride to Clapham, where she lived with her mother. Miller, as usual, escorted her.

‘I hope you are pleased with what I have done?’ he said on a sudden.

‘Pleased?’ she replied. ‘Of course I am. Pleased and grateful.’

In spite of the warmth of the assertion, there was less heartiness in it, less of reflective love, than she had been accustomed to bestow upon him. She had given him her hand as a token of

gratitude, but the pressure of her fingers upon his was more dainty than usual.

He noticed it, and half regretted that he had undertaken the night's business.

‘Randolph Watson is a very nice man?’ he said, trying to feel his way by the suggestion.

‘Very nice.’

‘I am told that he is a great favourite with the fair sex.’

‘Indeed!’

‘I have no doubt you think him a very handsome man?’

‘He is good-looking, certainly.’

‘He is lucky. I was born ugly, and will remain ugly for the rest of my days.’

‘Don’t say that, my dear,’ she retorted softly. ‘You are good-looking enough for me. And you are good, and honest, and kind; that is very, very much better.’

‘If I were only sure that you would always think so! But I am nearly afraid that when you get thrown daily in Watson’s way you will think more of him and less of me.’

‘What a great silly you are, my dear!’ she replied with a merry, silvery laugh. ‘You are

positively jealous already. What will you say when I am acting Juliet to his Romeo ?'

He had not thought of that. When he entered upon his negotiations with Brewster he had only one object in his mind : the professional advancement of the girl he loved. Now he remembered on a sudden that the end could not be attained without her being thrown in contact with one at least of the *jeunes premiers* or leading men of London theatres ; and, to his mind, they were all alike. He thought them all equally dangerous to his peace and happiness. But it had to be done. It had to be gone through.

'I have no doubt I shall get accustomed to it by-and-by,' he sighed ; 'but it will require practice. Don't think Randolph Watson too handsome. And when you act with him, don't—don't act too—too heartily. Promise me.'

'Why, it will be only acting—only make believe,' she answered blithely. 'You've often seen me act with men, and you never mentioned that sort of thing before.'

'Yes,' he rejoined, running his forefingers over the back of his head in doubtful musing, 'but they were not Randolph Watsons.'

The phrase rang in the girl's ears long after it was spoken. 'They were not Randolph Watsons.'

'Yes,' she thought, 'it must be very pleasant indeed to act with Mr. Watson.'

But she kept her thoughts to herself.

IV.

THE hall-passage facing the Royal Charing Cross stage-door was, on the morning following this first evening of our history, the scene of much wailing, mourning, and gnashing of teeth. Crowds of poorly-dressed men were accusing one another of having, by ill-advised and precipitate pressure, hastened their own downfall. The Charing Cross management was, according to all evidence, as solvent as ever. Mr. Watson's difficulties had been only temporary, and they who had shown so little confidence in their manager could not expect the latter to treat them with consideration. They were in mid-November. Most, if not nearly all, of the winter engagements were made, and here they would most likely be thrown out of employment just when they needed it most. A chill Christmas stared them in the face. Brewster's words, 'I'll remember this

when the next piece comes !' had been repeated, and they knew the ponderous manager well enough to expect little mercy from him.

Both Watson and Brewster came to the theatre early next morning. Miller had, on reaching home, drawn an open cheque for a thousand pounds, and had posted it at once. The cheque had been cashed the moment the bank opened, and the business-manager of the Charing Cross Theatre sat in his office behind a goodly array of little piles of golden sovereigns and of paper-bags containing five pounds' worth of silver each. The display was intentional, and had its intended effect. Before eleven o'clock had struck the tone of creditors and clamouring employés was changed. Men who had journeyed from their homes to the theatre fiercely intent to get what was due to them, changed their minds on a sudden, and either did not at all apply for payment, or when they were called to the treasury evinced an astonishing desire to remain the management's creditors for an indefinite period. Brewster, however, was inflexible. Everybody who had asked for money had to have it and to go. To all applications for renewal of engagement or contract he gave the uniform reply, 'I will see when the time

comes. It all depends upon circumstances. At present I have nothing to offer.'

There were, of course, some who had been faithful found among the faithless—poor Carter, the super-master, for instance; little Masters, who would have gone to the end of the world for his employer, even if he had been compelled to starve on the road; Wells, the master-carpenter, who had been sorely injured in the attempt to quell the disturbance of the previous night; and others. With them reticence was unnecessary; and Wells especially had to be told about the preparations he would be required to make for the next piece. It soon became known in consequence that the new production would be got up on a grand scale; that it was a spectacular piece, in which large numbers of men and women would be employed, and the remorse about the rash conduct of the previous evening was all the more poignant.

There was one person who felt keenly, more keenly perhaps than she cared to acknowledge even to herself, her regret that she had not shown a little more forbearance. Miss Northcote was a leading lady who had a reputation of being unlucky. She was a noble actress, and a handsome

woman, though past the prime, but somehow or other she seldom, if ever, played in a successful piece. Theatrical managers are a superstitious class, and most of them fought shy of Miss Northcote, her glorious acting and her fine presence notwithstanding. The result was that the lady was, on the average, three months in an engagement and nine months out ; and she knew only too well that, when they heard of the closing of the Charing Cross season, people would say, ‘ What else could you expect with that Miss Jonah in the show ? ’ She might be months perhaps without finding another engagement, and years without getting the salary at which she was then retained.

When Miss Northcote called at the theatre in the morning she was in a state of doubts and fears which made her heart beat feverishly, and her nerves tingle with excitement. She had seen the house full of comparatively enthusiastic audiences, who applauded her vociferously, and kind friends had told her that whatever success was made was due to her acting. Poor vain woman ! she had believed these silly, heartless flatteries, and had thought herself indispensable ; she had been peremptory, and nearly rude. Her threat had

rebounded upon her like a boomerang, and she felt sure that there was little hope of her name appearing on the next Charing Cross bill.

She did not go to the business-office, but directed her steps to Mr. Watson's private office, which was also situated on the dress-circle level. Masters was on guard at the door, and barred the way.

'Mr. Watson's engaged, please, Miss Northcote,' he said, with his habitual grin; 'and I'm not to disturb him on any account.'

'But surely that order does not apply to me!' retorted the lady, her eyes flashing with indignation, whilst she drew herself up proudly.

'I've no orders to make any exception,' answered the little man, smiling as blandly as ever; 'I'm very sorry—I am, indeed I am—but governor's orders, you know, and I can't help it.'

'And how long will Mr. Watson be engaged?' asked Miss Northcote despairingly.

'I don't know,' was the ready reply; 'but if you will go to Mr. Brewster, Miss Northcote, he'll tell you more than I can.'

That was just what she did not wish to do, and what she had been trying to avoid. She hated Brewster, and the latter, to do him justice, made

no attempt to conceal his dislike for her. She had been engaged in defiance of the business-manager's advice by Watson, who said he wanted an actress, and not a doll, to play with him, and the business-manager laid all the misfortunes of the theatre to the account of her supposed Jonahesque attributes.

She felt faint, and her heart ached as she entered Brewster's office.

The big man was sitting at his desk engaged in rapidly counting his money, and placing various sums in little envelopes, which he marked with divers names. He did not even look up from his work.

'I've come, Mr. Brewster——' said the actress.

'Oh, I know what you've come for,' interrupted Brewster. 'You've come for your money, Miss Northcote. Here it is. Good-morning.'

He handed her the little packet, and went on again immediately with his work.

She stood still for a moment's space with the money between her gloved fingers, turning it over and over again in a stony rage at being treated in so uncouth a fashion. She knew, however, that nothing was to be gained by resenting the affront, and restrained herself.

‘Does the notice in the hall apply to me, Mr. Brewster?’ she asked.

He raised his head but slightly.

‘Of course it does, Miss Northcote,’ he replied.

‘You are going to have another leading lady?’

‘Yes, Miss Northcote.’

‘Is it an indiscretion to ask the name of the lady?’

‘None whatever. Miss Sybil Collier will be Mr. Watson’s next leading lady.’

‘Sybil Collier!’ fumed the actress, utterly forgetting herself under the shock of her surprise. ‘A chit of a girl who has never acted in London in her life! I imagined something of the kind was going to be done when Mr. Watson was making such anxious inquiries about her last night.’

Brewster had listened to her with a vacant smile.

‘Have you anything else to say, Miss Northcote?’ he asked; ‘for if you have, I will wait until you have finished before I go on with my work.’

The lady stalked from the room like a defied empress, in a seething silence.

That chit of a girl had supplanted her, had

robbed her of her means of livelihood, of her work, of her nightly applause. That chit of a girl should be made to feel the enormity of her crime.

Women like Mary Northcote never threaten except in their own hearts, and they are all the more dangerous.

Whilst Miss Northcote strode from the theatre in an unreasoning and unreasonable rage with her rival, her manager, and if the whole truth be told, with herself for not having been more pliable, the principal object of this sudden hatred was ushered by the benignly affable Masters into the room upon the threshold of which he had stood in faithful guard against the leading lady who was so soon to be deposed.

Miller had accompanied her, but Brewster, summoned into his partner's sanctum by a message through a speaking-tube, pounced upon him like a hungry hawk, and carried the lovelorn swain, much against the latter's inclination, to his own office.

'A theatre combines art and business,' he said. 'Watson has charge of the art department, and I look after the money; and I assure you that Watson has the more pleasant task. There are all

the particulars to settle, and lots of other things to do—and then we shall have to go to Barney, Wilkinson, and Southern to draw up the agreement.'

'And how long do you think you will keep me?' asked Miller, seeing Sybil comfortably installed in a huge Queen Anne armchair. 'Miss Collier will get tired of waiting for me, you know.'

'Oh, don't trouble yourself about me,' replied the fair one gaily; 'I have many things to occupy me when I leave here. But, if you like, you may get tickets for the Lyceum, and fetch me from home in time for dinner.'

He hardly knew whether to be thankful or not, but he remembered the old adage about small favours.

'Thank you,' he said, with a look so full of devotion that it made the two hardened men about town smile; 'I *will* come and fetch you. We will dine at the Burlington, and I will buy a box at the Lyceum.'

'Now that the golden idol has departed,' said Watson, with a satirical smile, when Brewster and Miller had left, 'we may be allowed to think about the poor forgotten drama?'

‘Don’t call Mr. Miller a golden idol, Mr. Watson!’ exclaimed Sybil, pursing her lips in a pretty pretended pout; ‘I am sure he is nothing of the kind.’

‘He is your idol, is he not?’ retorted the manager laughingly; ‘and he is rich enough to be golden. There is no harm in that comparison—come now, Miss Collier.’

‘Since Mr. Miller is gone,’ answered the lady rather stiffly, ‘perhaps, as you say, it will be better to think about the drama, Mr. Watson. I am on thorns, you know. I don’t mind telling you I have not slept a wink all night thinking of it. My part is a good part—a really good one?’

‘It is the leading lady’s part of the piece, and the only leading lady’s part,’ he replied. ‘I have heard a great deal about your acting, but would you mind showing me a little specimen. You have played Juliet, of course?’

‘I have, many times.’

‘Would you run through the Chamber scene with me?’

‘The scene “Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day”?’

‘The same.’

‘Where?’

‘Here—now.’

‘I will try. You must not judge me too harshly, Mr. Watson. It will not be as at night, you know.’

‘Oh, I shall be able to tell. Let us have our substitute properties. This armchair is the open window, and the seat of the chair the balcony. I will wedge it in between this table and the bureau, so that it can’t tumble over, else Romeo might come to grief. Are you ready?’

‘Quite.’

She commenced a little coldly the beautiful scene. Watson, if not the ideal Romeo of Shakespeare, was an ideal love-maker of the modern stage, and his declamation was impassionate and faultless. Whether it was the excitement of the task, or her anxiety to give a pleasing test of her power, or genius forgetting its surroundings, or the fact that Watson’s arm about her waist gave rise to an intoxicating sensation, she soon so warmed to her work that she thrilled even the experienced and stage-tried actor. When Romeo cried :

‘And trust me, love, in my eye so do you.

Dry sorrow drinks our blood. Adieu, adieu!’

she actually offered her cheek to be kissed. The moment afterwards she remembered what she had done, and blushed crimson.

‘I beg your pardon, Mr. Watson,’ she pleaded ;
‘I forgot that I was acting.’

‘I wish it had not been acting,’ said the manager, with a meaning smile. ‘What a lucky dog that Miller is !’ and he gently pressed the dainty white fingers he held in his hand.

His big eyes glowed with a far more passionate lustre than he had shown during the rehearsal of the scene. Her looks were fixed to the ground as in a guilty remembrance, and she slowly raised them and met his gaze. It shot through her and made her tremble—whether with resentment of the audacity, with anger, or with pleasure, she knew not. She blushed an even deeper red than before, and, softly withdrawing her hand, breathed a deep sigh.

V.

WHEN Sybil Collier left the manager's private office that morning, a chiding conscience smote her. She accused herself of having been unfaithful—in thought, at least—to the man who loved her so much, who was staking a large sum for her professional advancement, whom she had allowed to hope that one day he would be her husband. With nearly the self-same heartbeat she rebelled against the self-accusation. What wrong had she done? What crime was there in being pleased to act Juliet with so magnificent a Romeo? She made a desperate effort to throw dust into her own eyes. 'It is all art,' she said to herself; 'all acting.' But the rebuking voice prompted a sonorous, bell-like 'No!' deep and convincing. 'Take care, take care!' cried the same voice. 'You find too much pleasure in the man's society already; from that to love there is but a step.'

Sybil had been brought up among professionals in the provinces where lots of girls marry young men who act in the same company with them, and are extremely happy. The story of Randolph Watson's 'gallery of beauties' had not reached her ears. At the same time she was discerning enough, when the flush of the excitement was over, to feel a slow indignation at Watson's assurance in making underhand love to her during their very first interview. He must have a very poor opinion of her, must deem her conquest easy, she thought, and her annoyance hissed and bubbled, and made her fingers twitch nervously. She would show him that he was mistaken, and in future she would be on her guard. She would armour herself in the strictest propriety, and use courteous decorum as a shield.

It must be confessed that there was very little of Herbert Miller in Sybil's self-communion that turned the scale against Randolph Watson. And yet she liked her devoted swain—she liked him very much. At times she thought she loved him, and she was always so blithely affectionate, so coyly radiant, and so warmly confiding, that the poor man would have staked his soul's salvation on

her love for him. He had proved her to be a good girl, and he firmly believed her to be a true one. The little twinges of jealousy stung and bit now and then like attacks of a mental gout, and his heart swelled with its own pain on those shortlived occasions. He was a sensible fellow withal, and vowed himself a fool for his pains, but though he struggled hard, the demon was not to be fought down altogether.

He noticed, with feelings of unalloyed pleasure, that Sybil's bubbling enthusiasm had quite subsided when she next met Randolph Watson. She was evidently intent to give the actor-manager no encouragement; and, more than that, he fancied that she meant to show to him that she was marble to the Charing Cross Romeo's personal attractions.

'She has taken my words to heart, the dear good girl,' he said to himself; 'heaven bless her! What a wretch I was to doubt her even for a moment!'

The manuscript of the new piece had been in Watson's possession for some time, but want of capital had prevented him from preparing it for production. He had been obliged to close his

carpenters' and property-makers' shops; in the wardrobe half a dozen sewing-machines were standing idle; he had discharged his scenic artist; every penny that was not required for the immediate purposes of the nightly performance was ruthlessly scratched out of the pay-sheet.

But all this was changed, and noise and activity took the place of sombre silence. A dozen men were hammering and sawing on the stage, and double as many more made the workshops of the theatre a Babel of sound. Two artists and their assistants kept four painting-frames going morning, noon, and night, and the wardrobe looked like a dressmaker's workroom in the height of the season. Other scene-painters were at work in their own studios; costumiers were busy, and orders had been flashed even as far as Paris for gorgeous accessories.

The remaining twelve nights of 'Much Ado about Nothing' were soon over, and rehearsals of the new piece commenced in real earnest. The stage-door was then besieged by crowds of discharged supers, carpenters, workmen, musicians, chorus men and women, and actors who had to stand by and see new faces pass the gate guarded

by the stage Cerberus whilst they were shut out into the fog and drizzle, and slush and cold, of the early December. A man who has not the wherewithal to buy food for himself and his family is not likely to be guided by sound reasoning, and under such circumstances even men of honest instincts become dulled in their appreciation of right and wrong. Sybil Collier was the figure-head of the new coalition which had ousted them from their employment, and when a lady of position in the profession like Miss Northcote went so far as to say openly at the stage-door that it was 'a shame that through Miss Collier's engagement a lot of hard-working people should be turned into the street at this biting time of the year,' they were not slow in proving to their own misguided minds that, instead of being themselves offenders who had been punished for their own misbehaviour, they were bitterly and disgracefully offended against. Miss Collier of course had her own friends and friends' friends to look after, they argued, and she was doing so relentlessly and regardlessly of the havoc she wrought among the old hands. It was all Miss Collier's fault; Miss Northcote had said so, and that was surely a sufficient proof.

From the tiny ball of snow which rolls down the Alpine incline grows the destructive avalanche. From the idle and spiteful tittle-tattle, from the malicious assertion of an embittered woman, grew a conspiracy which boded ill to Sybil Collier's success. There are always men to be found among all classes of the community who will stoop to mean actions, and who will not recoil from stabbing in the dark; and theatrical supers, carpenters, and employes are not free from the contamination of such black sheep.

Little Masters, his confidential position with the manager notwithstanding, was a favourite with the men all round, and he was the first to learn that there was something wrong with the intentions of the discharged men. What they meant to do he was as yet unable to tell, but one morning he stepped to his employer on the stage in a state of rare excitement. His fists were clenched and his teeth hard set while he waited for an opportunity to address the manager.

‘Why, good gracious! what’s the matter with you, Masters?’ exclaimed the latter, when he saw the changed countenance of his usually so humorous servant. ‘One would think you had seen a bogey.’

‘I’ve n’t seen a bogey, governor,’ replied the little man, ‘but I’ve found out that the men you have given the sack to are going to make it warm for you and for Miss Collier.’

‘For me?’ retorted the comedian with a dry smile. ‘They are welcome to all they can do to me. I know how to take care of myself. But what has Miss Collier done to them?’

‘I can’t guess yet, governor,’ answered the dresser; ‘but I know that Miss Northcote has been speaking to them and giving them money, and has been putting them up to all sorts of dodges.’

‘Miss Northcote had better beware of what she’s doing,’ said Watson with a quiet determination. ‘It will be the worse for her if I find out that she’s attempting to interfere with my conduct of my theatre.’

‘I don’t know how far she’s in it, Mr. Watson,’ the little round-faced man went on, ‘but I’m sure that they mean to goose Miss Collier on the first night.’

‘We will see to that,’ answered the comedian. ‘Thank you for having warned me. Don’t let Miss Collier know anything about this, else she

might be frightened. Run up and tell Brewster ; he'll know what to do.'

His outward assurance notwithstanding, the manager felt by no means at ease in his mind about the projects which were being fostered against him and his leading lady. He knew only too well that although an established favourite could well afford to laugh at any malicious combination, a new actress and a piece, the success of which might be trembling in the balance, were likely to be sent headlong into the abyss of failure by a hiss that interrupted a risky scene. The knowledge alone that there were men in the theatre determined to be revenged upon her for imaginary wrongs would unnerve a sensitive actress. Ordinary stage-fright would be as nothing to the hard, gnawing fear, the blood-chilling dread, of the disapproval that might spring upon her unawares at the moment when she thought she least deserved it. It would be no use to be armed with authority ; it would be useless to eject the dastardly fellows who had come on purpose to hiss a defenceless woman. The mischief would be done ; it would be too late. The originators of the conspiracy would have to be found and be met with their own weapons. They

would either have to be frightened into submission, or they would have to be kept in check and watched by a force of men. Bullies are notoriously cowards, and half a dozen determined men have, many times in the annals of London managements, cowed three times their number of malicious enemies. The existence of such conspiracies has been doubted, and even denied, by distinguished, appreciative, and experienced writers on the press. Theatrical managers know of them to their cost, and many an acting-manager could give a list of names of idle and worthless fellows who have over and over again wilfully, maliciously, and determinedly disturbed a first night's performance.

Brewster received the news of the probable conspiracy with a callous quiet. He seemed so indifferent and so little grateful for the warning that Masters thought that the business-manager doubted the truth of his statements or ridiculed them.

'I tell you what, Mr. Brewster!' exclaimed the little man energetically, 'they'll play old Harry with the governor and Miss Collier if you don't mind on the first night—and he so nervous too. And she, poor thing, stepping for the first time in front of a Charing Cross audience. It'll be awful!'

‘I’ll have a look into the matter, Masters,’ rejoined the business-manager stoically. ‘There’s always a great deal more cry than wool about these affairs. Don’t say anything about this to anybody, and, above all, don’t let anybody know you’ve told me.’

‘So they’re going to spoil our first night!’ he muttered to himself savagely when the little dresser had left the room. ‘I always thought Miss Northcote a mean, dangerous woman. We will see to it. We will give them rope enough to hang themselves.’

He went to a speaking-tube in the corner of his office and blew into it.

‘Send Dudley to me,’ he called when the answer came.

A simple-looking, wiry man of middle height entered the office a couple of minutes afterwards. His pale face was shadowed by a short, crisp, dark beard and moustache, and there was about it an air of dogged resolution. He was dressed like a clerk of the humbler sort, or he might have been taken for a workman’s foreman. In the theatre his recognised position was that of messenger, but in reality he was Brewster’s private detective.

‘Do you know anything about these goings on of the discharged men, Dudley?’ asked Brewster.

‘I do, sir,’ was the quick reply.

‘Why have you not warned me?’

‘There’s plenty of time.’

‘You have the business in hand then?’

‘Well.’

‘Who’s watching it for you?’

‘Freckled Smith, the carpenter, and Cockney Joe.’

‘Are you sure of them?’

‘Quite.’

‘What have you promised them?’

‘Their pay and two pounds each if everything goes right.’

‘Who is in the business?’

‘Miss Northcote is instigating it. I’ll bring you a list of the men in the swim this afternoon, if you like.’

‘I’d better have it. I know you would do the work without me; but I’d better know all about it. Here,’ he continued, ‘you will want money. Take this to go on with,’ and he handed the man a couple of sovereigns.

‘We will see whether Miss Northcote is going to

spoil our first night,' he said. 'She is evidently a new hand at this kind of amusement, else she would not try to tamper with our discharged men. We'll let her go on comfortably and quietly, and put the spoke into the wheel in due time.'

That same afternoon Dudley entered the business-manager's office and brought him a slip of paper.

'Seventeen in all, I see,' said the latter, after he had glanced over the list; 'and nearly all of them black sheep. McAfferty would sell his mother for a drink, and Richard Smith has been discharged three times from this theatre for drunkenness. I wonder why he was taken on again?'

'He's six foot three, Mr. Brewster,' replied the messenger, 'and Mr. Watson likes tall men for his guards.'

'Take care,' continued Brewster, 'that you get really all the names. It won't do to leave one out. See that Smith and Joe bring their reports every night, and, if possible, try to get such evidence as a magistrate would accept of Miss Northcote's part in the business.'

'That won't be easy,' answered Dudley. 'She never comes herself. Her dresser's daughter is young McAfferty's sweetheart, and she gets at the

father through the son. That's a long combination, but it's simple enough in its effect. She is too cunning a cat to put her neck into the noose.'

'Seventeen men so far,' Brewster said to himself when he was alone, 'and I dare say there'll be two dozen before all is over. But I'll make an example of them this time, and spoil the game for awhile at any rate.'

Notwithstanding all the precautions taken by Watson and Brewster, Sybil learned one day that there was a conspiracy on foot to injure her success on the first night. The discharged men were very nigh starvation, and it struck one of the bright geniuses among them that, by a few delicately-conveyed threats, they might perhaps be able to levy blackmail, and thus secure money and revenge at the same time. One of their number made, therefore, a clumsy show of indiscretion, and pretended to betray the secret of the confederates.

'It was a fact,' he said to the guileless Masters over a pot of four half-and-half, 'that the men meant to have their revenge on Mr. Watson and Miss Collier and the whole crew, and they were strong enough to wreck the first performance whenever it came off. He himself had been

dragged into the business against his will, and there were others who were in the same boat with him, and who only sided with their fellow-conspirators because they felt themselves wronged.'

The good Masters asked him if he wasn't ashamed of himself, and the man confessed that he didn't feel at all proud of his connection with the business.

'The men are starving,' he said, 'and a hungry belly ain't got no scruples. Why don't the governor try and square the business? I'll help him—dash me, if I won't.'

Masters went to his employer with his heart brimful and his tongue not half so glib as usual through the weight of the news. It was a foul business; they were a vicious crew. Why didn't the governor try to square them? Buying them was easier than fighting them.

Watson sent the little man again to Brewster, and the latter received him quite as callously and nonchalantly as before. Brewster's manner had an effect directly opposite to that which the business-manager intended. Masters took his free-and-easy style as an affront, and stated openly that Brewster was neglecting the serious warning

conveyed to him. He dolefully retailed his troubles to old employes, the old employes talked about the affair to men engaged on the stage, from them it came to the supers, and through these it reached the actors and actresses. Sybil heard all about it one morning at rehearsal. She was a plucky, determined girl, and strong in the knowledge of her innocence.

‘Do you know about this conspiracy to guy me on the first night, Mr. Watson?’ she asked her manager.

‘I have heard about it, my dear Miss Collier,’ replied the latter; ‘and,’ he added, lowering his voice to a whisper, ‘I have the business well in hand. You need not be afraid about it.’

‘I am not afraid about it!’ she retorted with flashing eyes. ‘The mean fellows! The public will protect me, I know.’

‘I will protect you, Miss Collier,’ said Watson in a fervent undertone, taking the little gloved hand in his and pressing it, whilst his eyes spoke more passionately than his tongue.

She had been avoiding his contact all through the previous rehearsals, but now his touch thrilled through her like an electric contagion, warm and

pleasurable, and, looking at him gratefully, she allowed her hand to remain between his fingers.

‘Thank you, Mr. Watson,’ she breathed; ‘thank you very much.’

‘You have confidence in me?’ he continued. ‘That is right. You would have even more confidence in me if you knew me better.’

She became afraid of the turn the conversation was taking, and opening her part again went on with her lines. Watson’s words reassured her, but the mischief was done. From that moment forward a feeling of unaccountable unrest, of undefinable uneasiness, settled upon her. She would have been ashamed to confess to herself that she was afraid, and as a matter of fact she was not actually afraid. Had she been able to face the trouble there and then she would have done so with a brave heart and a smile or a laugh; but the waiting, the days that had to be passed, with the cowardly attack creeping nearer and nearer, stealthily, unseen, until it would burst at her from its ambush, had a snaky, slimy terror of its own.

When Miller heard the news he was eager to resort to all sorts of drastic and extreme measures. He wanted to run to the next police-court to obtain

summonses for conspiracy, and when it was shown to him that no magistrate would convict upon such evidence as could be for the moment produced, he spoke about engaging an army of prize-fighters to meet the bullies with their own style of warfare. This kind of retaliation was so speedily and peremptorily vetoed, both by Miss Collier and by Watson, that he glumly and sorrowfully expressed his opinion that the only thing left to do was to buy the scoundrels, and to get them to applaud instead of hissing. This course of action was forbidden with equal energy by Brewster, who insisted that not a penny should be paid to the rascals.

‘Will you tell me what I am to do then?’ whined Miller disconsolately.

‘Do nothing whatever, my dear Miller,’ replied the sagacious and cold-blooded Brewster, ‘then you will be sure to do nothing rash or foolish.’

‘Miss Collier can trust to me,’ repeated Watson with a look full of meaning, ‘I will see that she comes to no harm.’

‘I am so much obliged to you, my dear fellow!’ exclaimed the careworn lover warmly. ‘You won’t let *me* do anything, therefore I rely on *you*.’

He had not noticed the looks of fervent gratitude

that sped from Sybil's eyes towards Watson's during their conversation. The comedian's manner was so full of unpretentious courage, of manly, unassertive devotion that Miller's hot and blustering manner compared in no wise favourably with it.

How handsome her Romeo appeared to her when he so calmly stated that she was safe under his protection ! There was still the dull dread of the unseen danger which worried her ; but beyond that, in her calmer moments, she blessed her stars for having so true and so manly a manager to take care of her interests. He became more handsome than ever in her eyes, he looked noble, and his quiet self-confidence reassured her. For that reassurance she was more than grateful to him, and a warmer feeling than mere recognition slowly generated itself in her bosom. It was not love, that of course it could not be ; but she asked herself over and over again if the woman would not be lucky and happy who would be so blessed by fortune as to be allowed to love and to be loved by such a man. She no longer acted with the cold caution she had intended to display at the commencement of the rehearsals. When he stood with his arms about her waist she nestled closely to him,

as in her part it was prescribed. When her head lay upon his shoulder, she felt that it rested in warm comfort ; when her hand was within his, she was pleased by the contact ; and yet in her heart of hearts she was true to Herbert Miller, and would have resented as an outrage the charge that she was wronging her lover.

The rehearsals became more frequent and more prolonged, and she was often compelled to take her dinner near the theatre. On such occasions the little party generally consisted of three persons, —Miller, Sybil, and Watson—until at last the confiding lover, as a matter of course, regularly invited the manager. To Sybil it afforded a new pleasure to have not only her lover by her side, but also the man with whom she was so pleased to be associated.

Watson was a man of experience in dealings with the fair sex, and he knew that when once the train is laid, it will run its course without the need of much fanning. He became reticent in his turn, and cautious, and listless. Indeed, he carried this kind of quiet attack so far that Sybil became slightly alarmed, and one day asked him if she had done anything to offend him.

‘Oh no, my dear Miss Collier,’ he answered; ‘only I am preoccupied, and you must excuse me. A man who has a heavy production on his shoulders cannot always be pleasant, even though he might like to be. It’s my misfortune, and not my fault, if I have done or said anything of which you do not approve. I will try to avoid it in future.’

The pressure of his hand upon hers again thrilled her, and its meaning was more understandable than it had ever been before.

Time wore on until the week previous to the production of the new piece was reached. Brewster and the wary, cunning Dudley had been deeply engaged all the while in quietly and with unseen hands weaving a stout net to entrap the conspirators. The latter being met with cold contempt in their blackmailing negotiations, became more furious than ever; and when men lose their tempers, no matter to what class of the community they may belong, they are generally apt to do unguarded and foolish things.

The result of all this was, that on the day previous to the one on which the new piece was to be produced, Miss Northcote, to her amazement, received a letter from the firm of Burney, Wil-

kinson, and Southern, Mr. Randolph Watson's solicitors, which was worded as follows :

‘ Our client, Mr. Randolph Watson, has conclusive information, and is able to prove to the satisfaction of a magistrate, that you have for some time past been engaged in instigating and fostering a conspiracy for the purpose of creating a disturbance at his theatre, on Wednesday evening next, on the occasion of the first production of the new piece. Your dresser's daughter Rosalie and the young man McAfferty have acted in this matter as your acknowledged agents, and to prove to you how ample and complete is the information in Mr. Watson's possession, we subjoin a list of one-half the names of the men engaged with you in the conspiracy ; the other half you will be readily able to fill in yourself. We think it best, in the interest of all concerned, to warn you, and to give you an opportunity of withdrawing from the evil and unlawful designs upon which you have entered, and of inducing the men who are conspiring with you to do the same. And we give you full warning that if these designs, or any portion of them, are attempted to be carried out on Wednesday evening

next, we shall take such proceedings against you and your confederates, both criminal and otherwise, as we may deem proper.'

Amazement and rage struggled fiercely and viciously with a desire for revenge. Miss Northcote knew perfectly well that if the slightest proof were adduced that she had been engaged in a conspiracy of the kind with which she was charged, her professional career was at an end. She would be boycotted worse than a leper; no manager would engage her at any price, and she knew also that the London public itself would bitterly resent the crime of having endeavoured to interfere with its free judgment. Her brother and sister artistes would shun her, and she would be pointed and scoffed at. It would not be necessary to convict her before a magistrate of the actual crime of conspiracy; it would be sufficient to produce such evidence as would leave a stain, a doubt.

She had thought the mine skilfully laid; not having acted in the matter in her own person, she had deemed an accusation against herself impossible; but the letter before her proved amply that the Charing Cross management had concise, ex-

plicit, and full information. There was a traitor in the camp, no doubt. Somebody had been bought, and somebody had sold her and left her tied hand and foot. There was nothing to be done except to stem the tide which would carry her to ruin. She herself had to dam the filthy flood of treachery so that she herself might not be engulfed. The callous, easy-going Brewster had been more than a match for her, and she was beaten.

Of course a bold face had to be put on it, and the whole business had to be denied *in toto*. She knew that the solicitors would laugh at it, and that Watson was not a man to be trifled with when he had such proof in his possession. With trembling fingers she wrote :

‘ Miss Northcote has received Messrs. Burney, Wilkinson, and Southern’s amazing letter with sorrow and surprise. She is grieved to think that Mr. Watson could possibly believe her guilty of such base conduct, and she is surprised that a firm of solicitors could lend countenance to so unfounded a charge. She wishes Mr. Watson nothing but the very best of success, and she trusts that the events

of to-morrow night will prove to him how utterly he was mistaken.'

To this epistle she received, on the same evening, the following answer from the solicitors :

' We beg to acknowledge the receipt of your note of this morning, and we trust sincerely that to-morrow evening's performance will pass in such a manner as not to compel us to resort to the strenuous proceedings against you which we have mentioned in our letter of yesterday, and which we shall assuredly take if cause arises.'

These men knew what they were about; they were not to be baffled by mere assertions. Watson showed copies of his solicitors' letters and Miss Northcote's reply to Miss Collier.

' You see, my dear Miss Collier, it's her interest now to make sure that everything goes off quietly. She is responsible for the suppression of the conspiracy. Your own rival will have to protect you.'

' What a clever man you are !' Sybil replied. ' And how good and kind you are ! I shall never be able to thank you.'

‘ You will perhaps one day,’ he breathed in reply.
‘ I’m not a hard creditor ; very little will repay me.’

She looked him in the face and smiled. She guessed his meaning, and this time blushed not.

VI.

THE first night was over, and piece, actor, and actress had made an unalloyed, huge success. The evening had passed without a hitch, and no sign of the threatened conspiracy had at any time clouded the horizon.

The baffled rascals, deserted by Miss Northcote, who was to have supplied them with the means of paying for admission to the theatre, aware of the fact that they had been betrayed, and that any combined attempt to interfere with the smooth progress of the evening's performance would bring down upon them the swooping arm of the law on a charge of conspiracy, found a vent for their harrowed feelings by holding a meeting in the back parlour of a dingy public-house in a dingy neighbouring street. They denounced and cursed Miss Northcote, who had instigated their course of action

and then had sold them; they denounced and cursed the unknown traitors who had 'split' against them and had 'blown the gaff'; they denounced and cursed Watson, Brewster, and Miss Collier, even the light-hearted and inoffensive little Masters coming in for his share of the fierce and foul-mouthed denunciation. But being reduced to cursing, they were powerless to injure either the manager, the actress, or the piece.

Two or three of their number who presented themselves at the gallery pay-box, the warning and counsel of their comrades notwithstanding, were met by a trusty official, who, in the company of two sturdy attendants, was standing watch and guard. They were informed that they would not be admitted, and when they defiantly demanded the reason of the refusal, they were told that they were rascals who had come for the purpose of creating a disturbance. The sympathy of the bystanders was by this course of procedure immediately enlisted on the side of the management, and when the conspirators endeavoured to resist the edict, they were relentlessly tumbled out of the theatre on to the pavement. There, as they shouted and created an obstruction, the policeman on duty

took them into custody without further ado, and haled them to the police-station.

As there are people who, according to the poet,

‘to church repair,
Not for the doctrine, but the music there,’

there are persons—intelligent, well-bred men and women—who go to a first night not so much to see the performance, as to witness a possible failure, and the consequent baiting and badgering of author, actors, and manager, which have, in these latter days, been permitted to become the prime and unrestrained amusement of a certain small but noisy section of first-night playgoers.

The announcement of the engagement of an actress totally unknown to London audiences for so important a position as that of leading lady of the Charing Cross Theatre had been received first of all with cold surprise, and then with resentment. There were at the moment when Miss Collier was so extremely favoured a number of well-known London leading actresses in want of engagements, and although these worthy ladies were too wise in their generation to personally complain about neglect, they and their friends took care that

reports should be spread about Miss Collier's past career which were none too favourable for the young lady's prospects.

The stall audience contained a large sprinkling of persons disposed to be thus hypercritical, and it is a strange fact in theatrical economy that people who are known to be so biased invariably find ready admission to stalls and boxes when the outer public are unable to purchase seats. Their faces are well known, and the directors of popular places of amusement like to make a kind of exhibition of them.

But these good people had come to scoff and had remained to pray. They who, before the curtain had risen on the first act, had, with unabashed countenances, prophesied the speedy downfall of the new candidate for public favour, swarmed on to and thronged the stage when the curtain had descended for the last time, when shout after shout of approval resounded through the theatre, when the applause thundered in the galleries, and stalls, and pit, and echoed through the passages, and when Randolph Watson, leading Sybil Collier by the hand, had for the third time made his bow of recognition before the audience. She was a wonder, she was a genius ;

she was destined to become a new and modern Sarah Siddons. She was a marvel in comedy, and in the more pathetic passages she had held the audience spellbound. She required a little finish here and there, and this or that touch might have been a little improved, and this or that scene had been slightly marred—by nervousness, most likely ; but, on the whole, it was an extraordinary performance, and they were all so glad—so downright heartily glad, of her great and unchallenged success. The good dames, with their male friends, vied with one another in smothering Sybil with their adulations, and in offering her all kinds of assistance in case she might require them.

Sybil was worn out by the excitement and the terrible nervous strain of the evening, and prayed in her heart that she might be left alone. The noisy chattering crowd of supposed friends and admirers invaded her dressing-room as they had previously invaded the stage, and their position in the profession required that they should be treated with courtesy, that their fulsome praise should be received with recognition.

Sybil sat in the big armchair in her cosy little dressing-room, which Watson had furnished in the

shape of a small boudoir for her, with dainty flowered cretonne curtains, and little rococo looking-glasses, whilst one big mirror ran from floor to ceiling on one side. The poor girl's heart was sore in spite of her great thankfulness. She knew enough of the world and of the theatrical profession to feel that this wholesale flattery was far from being hearty and spontaneous. She had not been able to say a word to Randolph Watson, and to ask him what he thought of her. Miller's face had flashed upon her at times from the box in which he sat, and she had seen him applaud like mad whenever he had a chance. After that she had lost sight of her lover altogether; but she knew beforehand that it was useless to ask him for a critical opinion—whatever she did he would vow divine.

At last the idle crowd thinned visibly, and dropped one by one away. Sybil had to make a desperate effort to get rid of them by actually commencing to undress, and to prepare for reassuming her everyday costume.

It was long past twelve o'clock when a discreet knock at the door was heard, and little Masters brought a message from Watson to ask if Sybil were ready to join her manager downstairs.

‘And did you like my performance?’ she asked, with anxious heart-throb, as Watson met her at the door of his dressing-room. Her two little hands were in his, and she looked into his eyes with a fervent endeavour to read his inmost meaning.

‘I was extremely pleased, Miss Collier,’ he said; ‘more than pleased.’

‘You have nothing to reprove in the whole play?’

‘I won’t go so far as that,’ he said, pressing the soft fingers he was holding; ‘I won’t say that which I do not think to be strictly true; but I must confess that I was surprised. I had expected a good performance, but you gave a splendid one.’

‘Do you really mean that? You don’t say it to flatter me and to please me?’

‘My dear Miss Collier, I am your manager. It is my business to make the most I can of your talents, and not to spoil you. Believe me, the little blemishes shall be pointed out all in due time; but, taking the performance as a whole, I congratulate you—and myself as well—heartily upon your success.’

She felt thrice happy now. During that whole evening she had played for one man, and that man

was not her lover. Herbert Miller, she was well aware, would be pleased by her slightest effort; and he loved her already so deeply that his admiration would no further be increased. But Randolph Watson! To gain his approval she would have striven to do the impossible; and she did that which might to others have seemed impossible—she roused an originally apathetic audience to the height of seething enthusiasm. She was so grateful to him for the praise he bestowed upon her, and so comforted, that she might have cried happy tears if she had been granted the privacy of her own chamber.

Miller busied himself about her with kindly and dutiful attentions. No faithful *cavaliere servente* ever did more loyal service to his fair lady in times of mediæval courtesy than the happy Miller bestowed upon Sybil Collier that evening.

It had been arranged that Sybil, Miller, Brewster and Watson, together with a few friends, should sup at the Métropole, and after supper wait to read the early copies of the daily papers containing the critical reports of the performance. The ubiquitous Masters had, with the assistance of the friendly clerk of a wholesale newsagent, arranged to be

supplied with all the London papers at *three o'clock in the morning*, the *Times* being the only exception.

They were a jovial party in that great room at the big hotel in Northumberland Avenue, and Miller, as founder of the feast, made strenuous efforts to get the party to swim in Perrier Jouet, 1874. They were sure, or nearly sure, of the friendly consideration of the great *Morning News*. Mr. Barnaby Walker, the principal critic of the paper, was an intimate friend of Herbert Miller, and had over and over again expressed his great admiration for Sybil Collier's talents. But all of them were on the tiptoe of excitement as to how such influential papers as the *Daily News* or the *Standard*, for instance, would receive the performance. They could not possibly, in the face of the enthusiasm there had been exhibited, criticise it harshly, they thought; but yet, as Brewster pertinently expressed it, there was a way of 'damning by faint praise' which was worse than actual condemnation. The Charing Cross management had not been on extremely good terms with most of the leading critics. Many of these gentlemen had pieces to offer to London managements, and many of them had offered their pieces to Mr. Randolph

Watson, who had been compelled politely and ruthlessly to refuse them one after the other. After that, the intercourse between Randolph Watson and his late friends of the press had been of that glacial courtesy which is far worse than enmity, and he fully expected that he and his management would be none too well treated.

Shortly after the clock struck three, Masters and Dudley bounded into the room with reams of but half-dry, newly-issued dailies, and distributed the sheets at random all over the room. A surprise was in store for them. Every daily paper in London went into ecstasies over the performance, the piece, the actor and the actress, with the single and solitary exception of the *Morning News*. Mr. Barnaby Walker in his criticism of the piece had endeavoured and succeeded in discovering blemishes which nobody would have dreamt of finding without the experienced guiding finger of the great critic. He warmed a little when he spoke of the effect the piece and the artistes produced upon the audience; but he was coldly cynical and sternly critical whenever he spoke of Randolph Watson or Sybil Collier. For the latter he prophesied a possibly great future, but he told

her that she would have a good deal to learn before she could hope to find her name placed on a level with those of the great leading ladies who adorned the London stage.

Sybil could have cried, and nearly cried, when she read the notice, and Miller, with his usual exuberance, vowed that he would punch his friend's head. When he was told to hush and not say such silly things, much less do them, he felt the most injured of mortals.

Sybil took the notice so much to heart that her distress increased with each minute she pondered over it.

'What do *you* think of the notice, Mr. Watson?' she asked in a tremulous anxiety. 'Do you think it is just? Do you think it is true?'

'My dear Miss Collier,' he said, 'it is not just, and it is barely true. It is not altogether true, because it only tells a portion of the truth. The man is an excellent critic, and yet he omits many points he might praise, and makes a great show of the few touches he can conscientiously blame. But don't trouble yourself over it. Barnaby Walker is a sensitive crank. He is known to be Miller's friend. Most likely he is afraid of being

suspected of favouring us, and therefore deliberately goes out of his way to attack us for the purpose of proving his impartiality. He will see the performance a second time, and then a change will come over the spirit of the scene. He will say that you have taken to heart the advice he has given you, and that you have so wonderfully improved as to have, in a short space of time, become a magnificent actress.'

'If I could only hope so !' she breathed.

'Be assured it will be as I tell you,' answered the manager.

How wise he seemed to her, how just, how discerning, how impartial ! He was just to her, and, she acknowledged, just to the man who attacked her. He had been kindly appreciative, but not over fulsome in his praise in the hour of her great success, and now, when she felt the need of an experienced judgment for her support and the alleviation of her grief, he was again ready to soothe her. Miller could never have done that ; the good kindly soul was always being run away with by his nervous temper and his exuberance. She might love Miller, and she might esteem his many qualities, but she felt surely, as she compared the two

men, that she could not look up to him for support in the measure she might be able to expect from Randolph Watson.

In the fulness of her little heart she found new virtues in the man she admired, and, sad to say, the man she thought she loved sank in her estimation accordingly. Randolph Watson became more than handsome: he became noble; he became great. This was the kind of man she would gladly have acknowledged her lord and master—a man, a king among men.

As she drove home on that winter night with Miller, who, worn out by the excitement and by persistent combat with Perrier Jouet '74, was sitting back in the brougham by her side, open-mouthed and snoring, she thought that Randolph Watson would not have slept if he had been allowed to thus pass a quarter of an hour. His arm would have been about her waist, and he would have pressed her to him in warm and loving solace. Her head would have nestled to his shoulder, and she would have been happy—oh, so happy!

It was a bright winter night. The air was cold and brisk and keen. She felt chilly in spite of her wraps, and ensconced herself shivering in the

corner of the brougham. A big dray was crossing the road in front of them, and her coachman had pulled up his carriage by the side of a street lamp to allow the lumbering vehicle to pass. The yellow, smeary glare fell upon Miller's face, and as she looked upon the open mouth, shadowed by its reddish auburn stubby moustache, the uneven, partly projecting, discoloured teeth flashed at her in a light she had never seen before. Miller's face was nearly ugly, and she asked herself with a slight shudder if she would ever be able to get herself to kiss those lips. She had always tolerated Miller, and had liked him for his qualities more than his appearance, and she had not thought that it was necessary for her to admire a man to love him ; but now the features of her affianced husband became so unprepossessing, that a revulsion of feeling began a petty turmoil in her bosom.

When she arrived at her home at Clapham, Miller was still asleep. She aroused him by a gentle push.

‘Are you going to let me go in without a word, my dear?’ she asked peevishly.

The young man rubbed his eyes and looked about him in a fright.

‘What have I been doing? Where are we?’ he asked.

‘Why, you great goose, you have been snoring all the way from the Métropole. You are at the door of my house, and I want to say good-night.’

‘I am so sorry,’ he breathed, with repentant face and half-tearful voice, ‘I am so extremely sorry. You must have thought me so very rude, dear. I—I—I——’

‘Don’t say another word about it. I’m going in. Good-night.’

She barely pressed the hand which he tremulously held out to her. The door of the brougham clicked, and Miller saw her flying up the steps. He strained his eyes to catch another glimpse of her, but in a moment the hall-door was shut and she was gone.

‘I have offended her,’ he said to himself, as he drove towards his chambers in the Albany. ‘What an ass I am! I wish I could punch my own head for having gone to sleep. She has a perfect right to be annoyed.’

He had been very drowsy before, but he slept but little when he reached his own room.

‘I have offended her,’ he kept repeating to him-

self. 'What am I to do? I must think of something to make it up.'

When Sybil woke next morning she found on the little table by the side of her bed a small packet. On opening it there appeared to her astonished gaze a velvet and satin case containing a rivière of sparkling diamonds. Herbert Miller's card was inside, and bore the words: 'To my darling Sybil, as a memento of last night.'

'He is very good,' she said to herself, 'and he is rich. As his wife I would never know what care means. Shall I ever be his wife?' she asked; 'shall I, shall I?'

Then her thoughts wandered away and limned to her fancy the handsome face of Randolph Watson.

'Shall I?' she repeated, 'shall I?' and there was no answering echo to that cry in her heart.

VII.

THE piece had been running six weeks, and was an amazing success even for London, the city of amazing successes and failures. Great crowds blocked up the side streets nightly in the rush for seats to pit and gallery. The better parts of the house were literally besieged, and seats were booked for months in advance. Mr. Randolph Watson's management, which would have sunk into the gulf of utter failure but for Miller's helping hand, was again established in public favour, and money was coming in so fast that all past losses were wiped away.

On the Saturday night at the end of the sixth week, after the close of the performance, Randolph Watson was closeted with his business-manager and partner, Edward Brewster, in the latter's office. A big sheet covered with figures lay before

them, and the man of business was explaining to the comedian the position of their affairs.

‘We had £2,500 capital,’ said Brewster, ‘and on the 29th of November last our ledger showed debts to the extent of £2,619. We were therefore £5,119 to the bad on that day. The production of the new piece and the advance expenses cost us £2,573; therefore we had £7,692 to make up before a penny of profit was made. Last week our expenses were £830, and our receipts, including the morning performances, £2,127 15s., leaving us a profit of £1,297 15s. on the week. Miller found us £6,000, and in six weeks we have cleared £7,430, and therefore all our losses and the cost of production are very nearly cleared away; and we still have Miller’s £6,000 and our capital in hand. Do you understand all that?’

‘I follow it quite,’ replied the comedian. ‘We are making, according to that, an average profit of £1,250 a week.’

‘Quite so.’

‘How long do you think that these takings will continue?’

‘Two or three months at least.’

‘And then?’

‘And then we can reckon, I think, on a thousand pounds a week profit for a couple of months more. Afterwards the profits will drop to five or six hundred pounds a week, or perhaps a little less.’

‘And that, I suppose, will last a few months longer?’

‘Yes; I think we are safe for a forty weeks’ run at least, before we shall want a new piece.’

‘And in those forty weeks,’ went on Randolph Watson, ‘we shall make about forty thousand pounds profit.’

‘That will be about the figure.’

‘Humph!’

‘Aren’t you satisfied with the prospect?’

‘Quite. But I was thinking——’ The comedian paused for a moment, and cast an anxious look towards his partner. ‘I was thinking——’

‘Well, what were you thinking about?’

‘I was thinking that Miller for the loan of £6,000 will make a profit of £10,000 in less than a year.’

‘He will do that if we keep him as partner,’ retorted the business-manager.

‘If we keep him as partner?’ questioned the comedian.

‘Yes, if we keep him as partner,’ was Brewster’s pointed remark.

The actor-manager sat bolt upright in his chair.

‘You made the agreement, Brewster,’ he said, ‘and you know more about these things than I do.’

‘Burney, Wilkinson, and Southern drew the contract,’ retorted Brewster, in a tone of dry matter-of-fact, ‘but I sketched it out.’

‘Hang it all, Brewster!’ exclaimed Randolph Watson, ‘don’t play hide-and-seek with me. Our interests are the same. You said just now “if we keep him as partner.” There’s something behind that. Speak up; is there a way of getting rid of him?’

‘I have been saying to myself that ten thousand a year for six thousand pounds capital is too heavy an interest to pay.’

‘That is my candid opinion, and I’m glad that you see it in the same light.’

‘I have been looking over the agreement, and I find that in our anxiety to clench the bargain we have signed a very firm document. There are only two ways of getting out of it; one is, to buy him out.’

‘Buy him out?’ asked the comedian. ‘How can you expect us to do that? He’s not such a fool as to throw up such an income without a due return. He looks simple enough, and he’s pretty free with his money, but he’s not likely to make us a present of thousands.’

‘Well,’ retorted the business-manager calmly, looking his partner straight in the face, ‘there is another way.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Watson.

‘It is one which you will have to take in hand,’ replied his partner.

The comedian paused for a moment’s space, and then ejaculated an inquiring ‘Well?’

‘It is to make him quarrel with Miss Collier,’ was the matter-of-fact reply.

‘Quarrel with Miss Collier?’ exclaimed Watson, with a great show of amazement. ‘What on earth makes you think of that?’

‘Because it is the simplest way of getting rid of him,’ answered Brewster. ‘He has only taken an interest in the theatre because he wished to help her. Make him quarrel with her, and when he has broken with her he will throw his partnership agreement to the dogs. I know him well enough.

He is impulsive, headstrong, and quick to act; and, believe me, that is the best and cheapest way.'

'And why am I to take charge of that business?' asked the actor.

The business-manager blinked more than ever with his little eyes, and smiled.

'Come now, Watson,' he said; 'I'm not as wide awake as a weasel, but neither am I a mole. You can twist the girl round your finger, if you like. Twist her, not only for your purpose, but for our joint interests.'

'And how am I to make Herbert Miller quarrel with her, pray?' asked the actor, with a great pretence of naïveté.

'Why, goodness gracious, Watson!' exclaimed the ponderous one, with a faint show of ill-temper; 'what will you ask me to advise you upon next? You'll find it easy enough, and if you want a report or two spread about the clubs, let me know, and it's done.'

'I will think the matter over,' said the comedian. 'The game is perhaps worth the candle.'

'The game is worth the candle in more ways than one,' said Randolph Watson to himself, going down the stairs to his cab. 'The girl is handsome

—devilishly handsome. She is clever, and she seems, after all, destined to adorn a niche in my gallery of beauties. You will have to set to work in earnest, Randolph. I think the prize is to be had for the seeking. Yes, yes,' he continued, as he drove away, 'she will most assuredly adorn a niche in my gallery of beauties.'

Now, if anybody had told Randolph Watson and Edward Brewster that they were mean and despicable rogues, they would have been surprised and pained. Herbert Miller had saved them from ruin. Now, a man may be perfectly honest, and yet not possess a spark of human gratitude. But it has been laid down by all lawmakers of nations, from Moses, Drako, and Solon onwards, that he who deprives another man of his property against his will, and without his consent, is a thief and a rogue. Here they were plotting to deprive Herbert Miller of his happiness, and of the money justly accruing to him. A man's happiness, like Othello's good name, although of great value to the owner, is not held by civilized law to be a quantity for the purloining of which a man can be prosecuted; but even the unscrupulous Brewster would have acknowledged that the large sums due to Herbert

Miller were property for the unlawful acquisition of which he would have rendered himself liable to condign punishment.

Neither Randolph Watson nor Edward Brewster was really dishonest according to the cold legal interpretation of the term. Neither of them would have picked Miller's pocket ; neither of them would have stolen a sovereign from his mantelpiece ; neither of them would even have cheated him at cards. Neither of them would have dreamed of robbing excepting in the most legal and respectable fashion. For it is strange paradox in criminal terminology that whilst it is a felony to steal a penny loaf, it may be perfectly honest, respectable, and excusable according to law to rob a man of thousands of pounds. Porteus has said that 'one murder made a villain, millions a hero.' Brewster, who only the week previously had had a poor check-taker condemned to two months' hard labour for stealing and reselling three shilling checks, considered that he was doing no dishonest act when he conspired with his partner to rob Herbert Miller of his thousands. On the contrary, he rather flattered himself on his sagacity and business acumen, and rubbed his hands in complacent pride at his clever-

ness. And, after all, he was only doing that which, less barefacedly perhaps, occurs a hundred times in each year in a hundred different walks of life. We are told that when the devil was sick he offered to become a monk; but when his Satanic Majesty was cured, according to the same authority, he repented himself of his bargain, and 'the devil a monk was he.' When the Charing Cross management was on the extreme verge of ruin, Brewster was perfectly willing to pay any interest for money to help him out of his trouble; but when ruin had been averted, he thought it not at all unbecoming a former officer in her Majesty's army, and a gentleman, by dishonest means to rid himself of his contract.

'I have been thinking over your suggestion about Miller's partnership,' said Watson to the business-manager, when they were again closeted a few days later, 'and I feel sure that Miller will not throw up his agreement with us on account of anything I can get the girl to do. He will gladly forgive any escapade, and the little woman is too straight and too staunch as yet to do anything really serious. He will stick to the girl while she gives him the least little flickering glow of hope.'

‘That’s cold comfort,’ retorted Brewster. ‘And are we to keep on paying him two hundred and fifty or three hundred pounds a week for the advance of six thousand?’

‘No, I would rather not,’ answered the manager, pursing his lips.

‘Well, and how do you propose to arrange the matter?’ asked the man of business.

‘I will endeavour to get the girl to quarrel with *him*.’

‘I don’t care a cent how you settle the business,’ rejoined Brewster, ‘if we only get rid of him.’

‘Well, I fancy we can get rid of him—I think,’ said Watson; ‘but it may take a little time. I will set the ball rolling next Sunday, but you must help me.’

‘Anything between pitch and toss and manslaughter, old man,’ exclaimed the anxious partner.

‘Miller goes on Friday next to Liverpool, to be present at his sister’s wedding. On Sunday next you must give a little dinner at your rooms, and you must invite a snug party of eight, consisting of yourself, myself, Miller, Sybil Collier, and two men and two women whom I will name to you, whose

positions are indisputable, and whose characters are irreproachable, but who are not likely to keep any fact to themselves which, in their opinion, would interest their neighbours and injure their friends. You will send Miller's and the girl's invitations on the Friday night, and Miller's will reach his chambers when he is gone. I will get the girl to come alone, in spite of Miller's absence, and I think I can manage the rest of the business.'

'I think you can,' exclaimed Brewster. 'Trust *you* to be there, or thereabouts, where a petticoat is concerned. But my rooms are not furnished well enough for such a spread.'

'We must not mind spending a hundred pounds of the partnership money—or more, if necessary—and do the thing well. Gunter will supply the meal and the service, and Waller will lend you whatever furniture, curtains, carpets, and knick-knacks you may want. If that will be our only expense for getting out of a bad bargain, it will be cheap. The girl would never come to *my* place; but you have such a reputation for bachelor respectability, that she won't refuse you.'

'All right,' replied the big man; 'consider it done.'

Men like Edward Brewster never allow the grass to grow under their feet, and long before the Saturday dawned the hard-headed business-manager had made all the necessary arrangements for the little dinner-party.

When Sybil Collier came downstairs to breakfast on the Saturday, she found among her correspondence the following polite invitation from the spider to walk into his parlour :

‘ MY DEAR MISS COLLIER,

‘ Will you honour me with your company at dinner on Sunday next at eight o’clock at my rooms, No. 580, Strand ? I have asked Mr. Miller to favour me by accompanying you. Besides Mr. Miller, Mr. Randolph Watson, and myself, you will meet Mr. and Mrs. Horace Grantham, Mr. Charles Smailey, and Miss Rose Wentholme. So, you see, it will be quite a professional little party, in which you will feel yourself thoroughly at home.

‘ With kindest regards,

‘ Your sincere admirer,

‘ EDWARD BREWSTER.’

Mr. Horace Grantham was one of the oldest and most respected actors alive. In fact he was so old

that he was partly blind and quite deaf ; but his name was a power in the profession, and pronounced with the reverence due to a distinguished past. Mrs. Grantham, also formerly an actress of high attainments, was fully thirty years her husband's junior, and she was a scandal-monger of established reputation. Miss Rose Wentholme, a fair comedienne, who efficiently hid at least fifty summers behind an artistic shield of powder and paint, considered herself the arbiter of proprieties in matters socio-theatrical. Woe to the misguided lady who committed an act of imprudence in Miss Wentholme's presence or to Miss Wentholme's knowledge. Her character was thrice slain before she was aware of it. Mr. Charles Smailey was the author of the piece which had made the fortune of the Charing Cross Theatre. He was a quiet, unpretentious man, who spoke but little and harmed nobody. His invitation was an especial sop to the Cerberus of respectability and propriety.

Nobody could possibly object to Sybil Collier's accepting an invitation to such a party. Her character could certainly not suffer in going to it ; whether it would live after the function was over was another and a more delicate question.

Sybil had in the meantime tried hard to steel herself against the blandishments of the handsome manager, and to nerve herself for the after all not too terrible future when she would become the wife of a very rich, very honest, and not very prepossessing gentleman who loved her very much, and whom she really wished to love if she were able. She could not help liking Herbert Miller; he was so fond of her, so lavish of his gifts; he would have slain dragons in her cause. But she would have by far preferred to have Herbert Miller for a kind, devoted, loving brother, and Randolph Watson for a husband, leaving kindness and devotion to the chances that might spring from the womb of time. She did her best not to show to her lover that another man's picture over and over again shaped itself before her dreaming eyes, and in all but these passing thoughts she was loyal and true to Herbert Miller and to the promise she had given him.

With all that, the pleasure she found in Randolph Watson's society increased as the days wore on. There was a magic, delicious contagion in his touch which fired her and made her sigh. Would to heaven, she would say to herself, that he might

be given to her as her life's partner ! But with the same heartbeat she would cry 'shame' against herself, and her truth and faith always remained victorious.

Brewster's letter left her in a sad state of doubt. How annoying ! Brewster was evidently unaware that Miller had gone to Liverpool. Would he expect her to go without Miller ? Could she go without Miller ? Ought she to go without Miller ?

Her mother, appealed to on the subject, eased Sybil's mind.

'Mr. and Mrs. Horace Grantham,' said the old lady, 'are most respectable, and Miss Wentholme would not go to any entertainment where she would be likely to meet doubtful people. Besides these, there are only your manager and his partner and Mr. Smailey. You can go there in perfect propriety, my child, and Herbert will have no reason to disapprove the step.'

Ah ! but the good, kind lady did not know what it meant to Sybil to meet her manager in the intercourse of private life without the protecting presence of her lover. She did not dream how much her daughter was afraid of her manager, and how afraid she was of herself.

Sybil sent no reply to the note, but preferred to wait until she came to the theatre at night. She was more than half inclined not to go. She had never, since she had known Herbert Miller, gone to any party or entertainment without him, and although on the present occasion the names of the guests were ample defence against the sting of scandal, she felt by no means sure of her own strength of purpose when face to face, and perhaps—who knew?—for a moment alone with Randolph Watson. What might not such a moment have in store for her?

The weather was vile all the day and that evening—snow, fog and slush, and her coachman, whilst driving to the theatre, had several narrow escapes from impending collisions, and more than one word-battle with the drivers of other vehicles.

Sybil was a nervous little woman, and hated these scenes, and in the result arrived at her dressing-room sorely out of temper. On her toilet-table she found another note from Brewster pressing for an answer to his invitation.

‘What a worry that man is!’ she said to herself, pulling off her gloves and throwing them on the

console slab in front of her. 'I'll give him his answer, since he is so pressing.'

'MY DEAR MR. BREWSTER,' she wrote, 'I do not feel very well, and am out of sorts. I should have been glad to accept your invitation, if Mr. Miller had been here to accompany me; but I don't like to go alone. I hope you will have a very nice and enjoyable party, and that you will not miss the company of yours sincerely, SYBIL COLLIER.'

She gave the missive to her dresser with instructions to take it to the business-manager's office.

That being over, she sat herself down in her easy-chair and began to think that she was rather glad to be relieved of the trouble of going to the party.

'I would not have refused him if I had not been out of temper,' she said to herself; 'but now that it's done I'm glad.'

She was not, however, left long in the enjoyment of the satisfaction given her by that fresh illusion. She had taken off her walking-dress, and assumed the loose wrapper in which she attired herself during the process of making up, when a discreet knock was heard at the door, and a voice, which

she recognised as Randolph Watson's, asked softly :

‘ May I come in, Miss Collier, please ?’

In answer to her ‘ yes,’ the manager stepped into the room.

‘ What’s this I hear, my dear Miss Collier ?’ he said. ‘ Brewster is so disappointed. His party will be quite spoiled, and the poor man has got it up specially in your honour. He feels quite hurt, and he cannot guess what made you refuse.’

‘ But, my dear Mr. Watson,’ replied Sybil, ‘ I can’t go without Mr. Miller, surely.’

‘ And why not, pray ?’ he retorted. ‘ What difference can Mr. Miller’s presence make to you in company with such people as Mr. and Mrs. Horace Grantham and Miss Wentholme. With these good ladies as chaperones, you surely need not be afraid.’

‘ I really don’t want to go, Mr. Watson,’ she replied peevishly ; ‘ and I would much rather not go.’

‘ Not even if I asked you to go ?’ he pleaded.

He was standing at her back, but her face was reflected in the mirror in front of her, and he could thus look into her eyes.

‘Not if I asked you to go?’ he repeated.

‘And why should you wish me to go?’ she inquired.

‘That’s a curious question,’ he retorted, ‘Miss Collier. To begin with, the pleasure I feel in your society should be my sufficient reason, but I ask it also as a favour to my hard-working partner, who has done all he could to further your success.’

‘And if I still decline?’ she asked.

‘If you still declined, I should say,’ he continued, ‘that you refused to go because you refused to meet me, and I should feel very much grieved indeed.’

She turned round and looked him in the face. Her eyes brightened with their native witchery, and she burst into a merry silvery laugh.

‘What an awfully serious affair you are making out of this whole business! One might think it were a function of state. Well, my lord, your lordship’s wishes shall be obeyed. You can tell Mr. Brewster that I will come.’

VIII.

MESSRS. WALLER, MEECHAM AND Co., the fashionable upholsterers, decorators and furniture dealers, were the contractors for their class of work of the Royal Charing Cross Theatre, and they had in the short space of three days done wonders in the plainly-furnished and disorderly apartment occupied by Mr. Edward Brewster. The dingy and time-soiled hangings had been carried to the storegarret under the roof, and soft carpets, sumptuous rugs, warm-coloured curtains and costly furniture took the place of the plainer articles that had long served for Brewster's uses. The business-manager had paid fifty pounds for the hire for a month of about a thousand pounds' worth of furniture, holding out to the firm the prospect of a probable eventual purchase of the things, and Messrs. Waller had, in addition to that, lent him for the occasion, without charge, a number of elegant

clocks and candelabra, valuable vases and excellent pictures, which made his rooms look quite like the home of a wealthy bachelor. The confectioners had supplied all the necessary glass, linen, china and plate, and although the experienced diner about town, and especially about the outskirts of society, might have recognised the ubiquitous, staid, white-haired butler, and the suave and noiseless, softly-spoken waiter who had been in the fashionable pastrycook's service for many years, it was quite certain that Sybil, at least, would not for a moment guess that all this parade of comfort and gloss was only temporary and made for her especial behoof.

Sybil discovered quickly that the two highly respectable ladies who adorned Brewster's hospitable board by their presence would afford her but small protection against Randolph Watson's artifices, if her own good sense did not help her. Mrs. Horace Grantham had fastened upon Brewster, and by a process of persistent delicate probing extracted from the big man a great stock of stories and incidents relating to members of the profession, which were destined to replenish her armoury of scandal, and to keep it in going order for weeks

at least. Miss Wentholme, the preliminary courtesies being over, sat open-mouthed at the feet of unwilling Gamaliel, Charles Smailey, worrying the good, modestly-minded man to distraction nearly by grandiloquent compliments about his work, and by questions about this phrase or that, discovering subtle meanings of which the author himself had never dreamed. Mr. Horace Grantham, directly after dinner, had stretched himself with expanded legs in a big arm-chair, and lay with gaping mouth and closed eyes, breathing gently in the soothing embrace of Morpheus.

Hence it came that Sybil was thrown upon the society of Randolph Watson, whether she liked it or nay. In sober truth, she had taken a speedy dislike to the two voluble chatterers. When Brewster asked the ladies whether they did not desire to retire to the drawing-room, both Mrs. Grantham and Miss Wentholme protested that they did not mind the smell of smoke at all, and would much rather remain in the pleasant company in which they found themselves.

‘Do you wish to stay here also, Miss Collier?’ asked Watson; ‘or do you object to smoke?’

Sybil felt a twinge of annoyance. These ladies

had taken upon themselves to snub her. It was their duty to escort their younger companion to the drawing-room, and here they declined the task without further ado, and with a Bohemian nonchalance for which Sybil had given them no excuse. The girl's pride rebelled.

'Thank you, Mr. Watson,' she said; 'I think I will go to the drawing-room. You will come, of course, Mrs. Grantham,' she added, with a look of appeal.

'We will be there in a few minutes, my dear,' replied the old lady, whom Brewster made desperate efforts to detain by his most spicy scandal. 'We will join you directly. But I do not want to lose this excellent story. Please do go on, Mr. Brewster.'

Smailey would have been glad to get rid, if only for a moment, of Miss Wentholme; but he was an inveterate smoker, and without his weed after dinner he could not do. Of two evils, that of foregoing his cigar or tolerating Miss Wentholme, he chose the less.

'Don't let me keep you, my child,' said Miss Wentholme patronizingly. 'I will come when Mr. Smailey has finished his cigar. But before that I

want one or two more explanations about his glorious piece.'

Randolph Watson had selected Brewster's guests with excellent judgment, and everything had passed naturally and of its own accord as he had planned it. Sybil gave him her arm in a silent disdain, and they passed out of the dining-room.

Now, it had been a portion of Randolph Watson's plan to have two rooms furnished as drawing-rooms—one to be the real reception-chamber, to which Brewster would conduct his guests, and another, a little smaller, but even a more cosily-furnished room, which was reserved for the especial purpose of entrapping Sybil. The actual drawing-room was quite at the end of a passage, and the other—the door covered by heavy velvet curtains—was situated between it and the dining-room. Watson conducted the unsuspecting girl to the gilded trap he had prepared for her.

'I am sorry now that I asked Brewster to invite Mrs. Grantham and Miss Wentholme,' he said. 'They are so selfish. It would have been far jollier to have a couple of lively girls than these two ladies.'

'I wish Mr. Miller were here,' sighed Sybil in a tone of impatience.

Watson had seated himself in front of her on one of those low, square, softly-cushioned seats which modern upholsterers fashion.

‘Do you really?’ he asked, his big eyes aglow with a passionate longing which half frightened the girl.

She looked about the room as if afraid of a surprise. Rich velvet hangings covered every opening, and prevented the penetration of sound. She was determined, however, to show to him that she felt herself strong enough to resist his advances.

‘I do, indeed,’ she said, in a voice of banter. ‘Would you not have been glad to have him here?’

‘I like our friend Herbert Miller exceedingly,’ replied the manager; ‘and I am always glad to see him—nearly always,’ he corrected himself. ‘But’—there was a slight pause in his speech, as if emotion were preventing utterance—‘in this instance I am happy to know he is away.’

This was just what she had dreaded; and she had allowed herself to be alone with him, knowing that she dreaded it. She had been all through the dinner in a hot anxiety that she might not be thus left with Randolph Watson, and yet she herself

had deliberately walked into the privacy, the still solitude, of this heavily-tapestried apartment with him.

For a moment, and a moment only, she felt inclined to rise and rush out of the room, but the instant afterwards an impulse about her heart, mysterious and inexplicable, restrained her.

Watson placed his low seat closer to her.

‘Do you know,’ he said, with the air of manly honesty he knew well how to assume, ‘that I have a confession to make to you?’

‘A confession?’ she echoed.

‘Yes, a confession,’ he repeated; ‘and a full and ample apology—then perhaps you will grant me absolution.’

His gaze was so frank, so earnest, that she repented of her former intentions. She had always found pleasure in his society, and now the delicious sensation engendered by his near presence thrilled her whole being.

‘Tell me the offence,’ she breathed, nearly tremulously, ‘and I will try to be lenient.’

‘I have to confess,’ Watson went on, possessing himself of her little hand in the meantime, ‘that I have schemed, and plotted, and planned for days

past, and all the hours of this present day, to be for a few moments alone with you.'

The danger was approaching. It was there—but she no longer dreaded it. It was a sweet, a luscious, a voluptuous terror—a fragrant, soul-entrancing, heart-enwrapping peril—which deadened her senses to all but the redolent presence of the man who to her seemed so handsome as to dash every other picture, every thought of another, from her mind.

She remained silent, with blushing face and drooping eyes. He had not hoped for such an easy opening of the battle.

'Yes,' he continued, 'it is part of a plan that you are here alone with me at this moment. I confess the guilt of it, and, you see, hardened sinner that I am, I glory in my shame.'

He had sunk on one knee before her, and pressed her little rosy-tipped fingers.

'I have schemed,' he went on, amid her unrepenting silence, 'because I love you—because I burned to tell you that I love you—because for this one moment I would gladly give years.'

'Ah! to how many women have you said exactly the same words?' she asked, still leaving her hand

within his. 'And how many have believed you and repented their belief !'

She had not repelled him. She had not risen in anger and reproach. Victory was sure.

'I have spoken to none,' he answered warmly, 'as I am speaking to you now. I know what you mean, and I will not make you believe that I have lived the life of a monk, of a hermit, or a saint. It would be foolish, and it would be untrue, and I respect you too highly to deceive you. But I have never loved a woman as I love you ; I have never felt for a woman the unalterable devotion I feel for you.'

She turned her face aside in the delightful tremor of new consciousness. How often had Herbert Miller spoken to her of his love, of his great and honest love ! Yet, though she knew that he loved her truly, Miller's homely phraseology had always made her smile and titter. But Randolph Watson's words stabbed themselves upon her heart with a voluptuous pain, and her soul was bare and hungry for the welcome torture.

'And if I were to believe you,' she breathed in reply, 'if I were foolish enough to credit the truth of a word you have said, what then ?'

‘What then?’ he repeated, whilst his free arm slipped softly around her waist, and she resisted him not; ‘then we might be so happy.’

‘Happy!’ she sighed. ‘Happiness is so often spoken about, and so seldom found. It is rarely detained long. A woman loves; a man thinks, or makes believe, that he loves. It is conquest for the man, sacrifice for the woman. Ah, don’t try to deceive me, to throw dust into my eyes! When the first hot rush of passion is over, and critical judgment takes the place of boundless admiration, so few of us women can bear the brunt of a cold-hearted scrutiny.’

‘I should love you for ever, dearest,’ he answered. ‘I am free. You can be free if you like.’

‘If I like!’ she sighed. ‘Poor Herbert!’

For the first time during this scene her fancy pictured to her her uncouth, honest, noble-hearted, trustful lover. Watson’s arm was about her waist, her hand was in his, her eyes were peering into his. For a mere second the accusing vision flashed and gleamed, and then was gone.

Watson drew her towards him. Her face flushed, her eyes sparkled, her bosom heaved, and her lips trembled. She felt her heart beat in a wild tumult,

and her limbs shook in a riot of self-abandonment. What might have happened she knew not, when on a sudden the outer hanging of the door was pushed aside, and Miss Wentholme's strident voice reached Sybil's ears.

'For goodness' sake!' Miss Propriety was crying, 'where can Miss Collier be?'

'Look in here,' answered Mrs. Horace Grantham. 'Perhaps she is in this room,' and the moment afterwards the two ladies entered.

'Goodness gracious!' exclaimed Miss Wentholme, 'here she is, to be sure—and alone with Mr. Watson—and——'

The good lady looked at Sybil's flushed face, and interrupted herself in a mute, pious, and horrified inquiry.

'We have been looking for you all over the place,' said Mrs. Grantham, with a cold hauteur. 'Why did you not go into the drawing-room?'

'It is perhaps more cosy here,' sneered Miss Wentholme, and the two ladies sailed out like embodiments of frigid disapproving disdain.

Sybil had risen, her eyes aglow with anger.

'What is the meaning of this?' she asked. 'Is this not the drawing-room?'

‘It is *a* drawing-room,’ replied Watson; ‘but there is another—a little farther on in the passage.’

‘You said you schemed for this,’ said Sybil bitterly; ‘I can see now that you spoke truly.’

‘And what need you care? What need we care?’ he rejoined. ‘Let these old women think what they like.’

‘That is all very well for you,’ she answered. ‘I would gladly let them think what they like. But they will say what they like, and I care a great deal about that.’

‘We have done no wrong,’ he retorted. ‘They can say that we have been here alone. Well, what crime is there in that?’

She had recovered her self-possession, and defiantly shook her fair head.

‘I don’t care, after all,’ she said. ‘If they had not discovered something to talk about, they would have invented it. So in the end there will be no difference. But now, Mr. Watson, if you please, we will go into the drawing-room—the real drawing-room.’

He retained her gently.

‘May I hope?’ he asked.

‘Everybody may hope,’ she replied, with a

laugh. 'Dark is the hour when hope is taken from us.'

'Don't speak like that,' he pleaded. 'I ask for so little. May *I* hope?'

She breathed an airy 'Perhaps! Who knows?' and slipped away from him.

When she reached the drawing-room, it was empty. Brewster and Smailey were still puffing away at their cigars when she opened the door of the dining-room, but the two ladies and the old actor were gone.

The first person to whom Mrs. Horace Grantham confided the story of Sybil Collier's brazen conduct was Miss Northcote. Miss Northcote agreed with Mrs. Horace Grantham that it was certain that Sybil was no better than she should be, and that it was a shocking thing that that true-hearted, noble-minded Mr. Miller should be so deceived. Would it not be right to inform Mr. Miller? Of course, neither of the ladies cared to carry scandal from one door to the other; but it was a shame, a bitter shame, and Mr. Miller so kind to her. What would she have done without him? In fact, when they came to think of it, what would the treacherous Watson have done without him?

The second person whom Mrs. Horace Grantham informed of the occurrence at Brewster's chambers was Herbert Miller's friend, Barnaby Walker. Walker was a man of common-sense, and had moved long enough in theatrical circles to appreciate Mrs. Horace Grantham's small talk at its proper value. He laughed, and thereby seriously annoyed the good lady, who roundly asserted that it was not at all a laughing matter. He ought to tell Herbert Miller. Barnaby Walker inwardly vowed that he would see Mrs. Horace Grantham in Jericho first; but he did not conceal his opinion that it was just like Watson to try and seduce a friend's sweetheart, and so hackneyed an occurrence that it was really not worth reporting.

Now, Mrs. Horace Grantham had been strictly accurate and truthful in her statements. She had exaggerated nothing in actual description, neither had she omitted aught that could weigh against Sybil. Barnaby Walker also, his poetic imagination notwithstanding, was an ordinarily truthful person, and far from a tittle-tattler. Miss Northcote was a stern and uncompromising advocate of the moral status of the profession, and with Miss Wentholme, whom she had occasion to see in the

course of the day, agreed that the facts were so deplorable, that it would have resembled the painting of the lily to attempt to varnish them by explanation.

It nevertheless came about that a rumour went the round of the theatres and clubs on the following evening that Sybil had quarrelled with and thrown over Herbert Miller, and was Watson's acknowledged mistress. Precise details were readily forthcoming. Sybil had been discovered, so said kindly report, by Herbert Miller in Watson's rooms. Herbert had charged the young lady with treachery, and she had laughed in his face. Miller, to avenge himself, said a further rumour, had taken up with and was about to marry Miss Northcote and to build a theatre for her ; but this part of the story was generally voted unreliable and discredited.

When the unsuspecting Miller arrived in town, and went to lunch at his club, he was immediately assailed with condolences, congratulations and questions. They were so sorry ; she was such a nice, bright, clever girl ; and they had thought she was very fond of him indeed. But after all he was best rid of her. A girl who was engaged to one man, and then went alone to another man's

chambers, was not worth grieving about. There were as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and there were plenty of women in the world quite as handsome and as nice as Sybil Collier. But how did it all come about? How did he surprise them? Why didn't he give the fellow a hiding? What did he intend to do? They hoped he wouldn't make a fool of himself.

Miller at first thought the whole thing a joke got up for his especial discomfiture. When he was told of the site he had selected for the theatre he was about to build for Miss Northcote, he enjoyed the humour of the affair hugely, and even went so far as for a while to join in the sport by a farce of corroboration. He soon perceived, however, that, in spite of the exaggerations and embellishments, there was some foundation of fact for the origin of the story. Frank and manly as he was, he attempted not to beat about the bush, but went straight to Sybil's house.

Sybil had passed a heavy, sleepless night. She was out of temper with herself for having allowed herself to fall into a kind of trap; she was out of temper with Watson for having set the trap and having caught her, a willing game, in his snare;

she was out of temper with Miller for having gone away and left her exposed to such danger. Thus unreasonable is pretty woman when she can find no satisfactory reason for her conduct.

Kind friends had brought her faithful and glowing reports of all the rumours that were flashing about the town concerning her and Watson. The same kind friends, out of friendship of course, had concealed nothing, and Miss Sybil's ire had been kindled to a fierce glow when she heard of the monstrous stories that were told about her. There was just enough of guilty blush upon her cheek to make the accusations appear dastardly to her. The retailers of scandal could not have dealt worse by her, if the charge had been true. And at odd moments she was half sorry that it was untrue.

For these reasons Herbert Miller, calling to ask for explanations, was likely to pass a bad quarter of an hour. He was, indeed, skating upon the thinnest of ice.

IX.

‘I HAVE come, my dear girl,’ said Miller, after the young lady had, with anything but a good grace, allowed him to press a kiss upon her cheek, ‘to ask if you know that people are spreading some curious reports about you?’

‘Do I know?’ exclaimed the young lady, rising from the seat she had just taken. ‘Don’t I know?’ Her eyes glistened, and she bit her lips and clenched her little hands. ‘Where have you been that you have only just discovered that the wretches have been saying things about me?’

‘You know very well,’ replied Miller, taken aback by this tempestuous reception, ‘that I have only to-day returned from Liverpool.’

‘Then why did you not return before?’ fumed Sybil. ‘Why did you leave me here alone to be exposed to all sorts of scandal?’

‘I came back the moment I was able,’ returned

Herbert, trying to pour oil upon the troubled waters. 'I found Brewster's letter at my chambers this morning, and I suppose it has something to do with that. But they say that you went to Watson's rooms.'

'They said that to you!' cried the young lady furiously. 'And what did you reply?'

'I—I—' stammered Miller, not at all relishing the turn affairs were taking—'I——'

'Yes, you!' hissed Miss Sybil. 'You! what did you say when they told you this?'

The eyeglass dropped from its accustomed nook and would not be replaced. The long fingers fumbled anxiously, and Miller wished heartily he had stayed in Liverpool or anywhere without provoking this scene.

'You have not lost your tongue, surely,' continued the lady. 'When you heard them say such things about me, what did you reply?'

'What could I reply?' was the ambiguous answer.

'What could you reply?' echoed Sybil with a sneer.

'You see, I didn't know,' said the young man in a feeble effort of pacification.

'Of course you did not know,' cried the girl in a

hot rage. 'How could I expect you to know? You heard men make such dastardly statements about me, and you did not tell them to their faces that they lied.'

'Is it not true, then, my dear?' inquired Miller tremblingly.

'What is not true?'

'You did not go to Watson's rooms?'

'Mr. Miller,' answered Sybil coldly and haughtily, 'you have pretended to love me. Love means confidence; love means devotion. You have dared to ask me an impertinent and insulting question. Get your answer where you obtained your information;' and without another word she flashed from the room, leaving the poor fellow speechless with amazement, perplexed in mind, and sore at heart.

Miller called the maidservant, and sent her with a humble message to her mistress imploring Sybil to return.

The girl came back with the answer that Miss Collier was unwell, and did not wish to have anything more to say to Mr. Miller.

Herbert sat down at the little bureau and penned a short note.

‘Forgive me, my dear,’ he wrote. ‘I really did not mean to say anything to offend you, and I am very sorry indeed if I have said anything to pain you. Do come down, if only to say a word; there’s a good, kind girl. Your fond

‘HERBERT.’

The scrap was brought back to him with the following line in Sybil’s handwriting written across it:

‘I judge people by their acts, not by their words.’

There was nothing left but to go. He did so with a heavy heart. His straightforward endeavour to sift the apparently wicked story to the bottom had resulted in disaster, and he knew as little about the truth or untruth of it as before.

He drove back to the West-End in a cold and painful stolidity.

‘I’ve put my foot into it with a vengeance,’ he said to himself, ‘and how to get out of it I don’t know. What did she expect me to say? I couldn’t say it wasn’t true if I didn’t know.’

In his simplicity of heart he did not conceive

that Sybil expected him to be her unquestioning champion in the face of her maligners. He was neither brilliant in his imaginings nor enthusiastic in his actions, though he was given to dashing off at extraordinary angles when the slow-working machinery of his cerebration was set in sudden motion. It never struck him that the young lady expected him to repel the charge against her, if not with lance and shield like a *preux chevalier* of old, at least by chastisement of the slanderers.

He strolled into the smoking-room of the Kemble Club. A heated discussion was going on at the moment among a little knot of members standing around the fireplace. Miller recognised Spencer Greetley, a prematurely aged young man about town, as one of the disputants, and the other was Randolph Watson. A chill and uncomfortable sensation crept over him, an expectation of something disagreeable, and he sat down on the leather-cushioned seat in the corner, apparently quite unperceived by anybody.

‘By what right,’ Watson was saying, ‘do you state that Miss Collier went to my rooms?’

‘I was told so,’ replied Greetley.

‘That is no excuse and no proof,’ Watson went on. ‘I demand to know your authority for the statement.’

‘I’ve told you,’ answered the other, ‘and I’m going to say no more about it.’

‘Oh, indeed!’ retorted the manager. ‘You spread a slanderous story about a young lady whom you do not even know, and you think you are going to get away like this. I want to know who told you that Miss Collier went to my rooms.’

‘I know it,’ retorted Greetley savagely, ‘and that is sufficient for me and for you too.’

Watson drew back a step.

‘You lie, you cur!’ he cried. ‘Take that!’

His fist shot out like a flash, and Greetley went spinning against the mantelpiece. The infuriated Watson was in the act of striking again, when he was pinioned from behind and held powerless, while his adversary, with bleeding nose and mouth, rose slowly, and scowled about him with an air of stupid astonishment.

‘Let me go! Let me get at him!’ cried Watson, apparently losing all self-control. ‘I’ll kill the lying hound! I’ll smash him!’

The assaulted young man was dragged away by

friends who thought discretion on his part by far the better part of valour.

Miller was sitting in his corner like one dazed.

‘That’s what I ought to have done,’ he muttered to himself. ‘That’s what I ought to have done when they spoke about Sybil to me. She is right. She is always right. What an ass I am! And what am I to do?’

He walked to the fireplace and gripped Watson by the hand.

‘I am much obliged to you, Watson,’ he said—‘obliged and heartily grateful. I wish I had been here earlier. I ought to have done what you did.’

‘Don’t mention it, my boy,’ answered the manager. ‘I only did what any gentleman, any man of heart would have done when he heard a good young lady foully libelled. He can have me up before the committee if he likes, or he can make a police court affair of it if he chooses. I don’t mind either. Every man with a spark of honour about him will say I was right.’

What will the reader say, what will he think, when I tell him that this scene of rage and passion was, on Watson’s part, in portion at least, cool, coldblooded calculation and splendid acting?

Watson had intended to bring the young slanderer to book, but he would never have done it so viciously and so violently if his quick glance had not espied Herbert Miller walking slowly into the room and creeping into his corner. The whole scene was as studied, regarding effect, as if it had been rehearsed, and as the lithe and wiry Watson acted it *con amore*, no man alive could have distinguished the tinsel fury from a real one.

The scheme was working magnificently. Sybil would hear of this, and would compare his hot chivalry on her behalf with Herbert Miller's apparent indifference. He had little doubt about the result, although he was, of course, as yet unaware of the young lady's quarrel with her lover.

That evening Miller strolled about the corridors and passages and staircases of the theatre in the hope of being able to speak a word of reconciliation to Sybil. Twice she flashed past him like an offended princess, haughty, disdainful and silent. He waited about the wings; he had his corns trodden on and his shins barked by the scene-shifters; he nearly fell down the dark staircase leading to the band-room; he crept about the green-room, comfortless, and not to be comforted.

Sybil evidently avoided him purposely, and he was unable to cudgel his brains to discover what kind of expiation would be likely to appease the anger of her whom he loved so well.

The cunning Watson had in the meantime taken care that Sybil should be duly informed about the one-sided battle he had fought in her defence. The voluble and devoted Masters gave to Sybil's dresser a glowing account of the dangers his employer had faced in the cause of the fair lady.

'That young Greetley,' explained the good Masters, 'said that Miss Collier had been to the governor's rooms. And the governor said she hadn't. And young Greetley said she had. And the governor said he was a liar, and he upped with his fist and hit him on the boko. And then there was a great shindy, but the governor wiped up the floor with him, and young Greetley's face was a sight to see. And the governor says he don't mind what comes of it. He'd do it again to-morrow for Miss Collier, and more if need be. He's a brick, the governor is, isn't he?'

Watson was a hero now, a faithful loyal knight to her, and Miller became mean and contemptible in her eyes. He had not only not stirred in her

defence, but had actually doubted her, and had dared to question her about his doubts.

The worst sting of it all was that a tiny, weeny voice within her at odd moments whispered words of reproach. Was she so pure thus to challenge the humble faith of her honest, if not too enthusiastic lover? Was there not a speck of tarnish upon the hands she professed so clean? Was she altogether guiltless? It was just this spice of self-accusation that increased her anger against Miller. She had not been altogether true to him, and in her womanly irritation she was nearly sorry that she had not been less true to him. She had been made to feel the sting of scandal without what appeared to her sufficient cause.

With his heart bubbling over with trouble, Miller went for advice to his disinterested friend Brewster.

If Sybil Collier's reputation had by this time required a process of whitewashing to Herbert Miller's mind, the business-manager's statements of the case in a nutshell, as he called it, would have been certainly of themselves sufficient. When Brewster had finished his account of the 'simple and innocent affair,' which was the sole basis of all this scandal, Miller began to look upon himself as

a wicked, foolish, and most justly punished young man. Sybil became more than ever an incarnation of purity to him, and he had not only misunderstood her, but had insulted her by his doubt, when his faith should have been boundless. He prayed, he begged his good friend to light him on to the path of reconciliation.

Brewster shook his head gravely.

‘You see, my dear boy,’ he said, ‘women are such queer creatures. You never know how to deal with them. What pleases one offends the other.’

‘But, old man, old man,’ blubbered the heart-broken lover, ‘what am I do? She won’t see me. She won’t speak to me.’

‘I don’t like to advise a man in a case of this kind,’ Brewster went on, shrugging his broad shoulders, pursing his lips, and stroking his chin. ‘It’s an ungrateful job—it’s a most ungrateful job. If it turns out all right, it’s “no thanks to you”; if it goes wrong, it’s “all your fault.” No, thank you.’

‘Don’t leave me in the hole, Brewster,’ pleaded Herbert. ‘You’ve so much more experience with women than I have. Tell me what *am* I to do?’

‘To tell you the downright truth,’ continued the ponderous man, ‘I don’t like to interfere in a matter like this, and if anybody but you asked me, I’d tell him to go somewhere else for advice. But since it is you, and you ask me to help you, I’ll tell you what I would do in your place.’

‘And what’s that?’ was the eager question.

‘I’d apply to her Bismarck’s famous method with the Parisians. I’d let her stew in her own gravy.’

Miller could not help smiling. The simile was too drastic for his comprehension, and he caught only its apparent vulgarity.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘I’d just let her fume and fret and be angry until she gets to think better of it; and in the meantime I’d sit down and do nothing.’

‘What will that lead me to?’

‘It’ll bring her back to you of her own accord. Let her imagine that you are offended in your turn, and she’ll soon think it time to bring you to her feet again. Women always scorn that which is thrust before them, and want that which they miss. If you stay away from her for three or four days, she’ll get scared, and, mark my words, she’ll write to you to come.’

‘Do you really think so?’ queried Miller, astonished by so much worldly wisdom and brilliant foresight.

‘Dead, downright certain, my boy,’ retorted Brewster enthusiastically. ‘No doubt about it. Only mind, I won’t take any blame, whatever comes of it. Turn it over in your mind, and do what *you* think best, and not what I advise.’

Brewster’s counsel seemed to Miller to embody the perfection of shrewdness and sagacity. ‘What a judge of mankind and their foibles!’ thought the admiring Miller. ‘He is a man of the world, and he is right. I will follow his advice.’

His confidence in Brewster’s soundness of judgment notwithstanding, he did not find it very easy to act according to the business-manager’s counsel even on the evening when it was given. He had been accustomed to stroll about the theatre with the assurance of a smile of welcome when Sybil’s bright eyes met his, and now he wandered about the house as if all cheer and comfort had departed from it and him. It was so hard to be so near her and not be able to speak to her; it was harder still to pretend not to want to speak to her. He was no great hand at pretending in any case, and this false

pretence, this affectation of nonchalance, when his heart was full of seething emotion, left him numb and chill.

When the theatre closed and the time came at which he usually met Sybil at her dressing-room to escort her to his brougham, he almost broke down under the weight of his resolve. His brougham was at the stage-door, waiting for him and Sybil. Would she wait for him, or would she use it herself without him? The coachman would obey her. He hoped that she would go home in his brougham. It would be a sign that the ice was thawing, and perhaps she would ask the man to convey a message to him.

He walked about the dress-circle corridor until the lights were turned out, morose and glum. Then he sat himself down on one of the long seats in the darkness, and listened with hushed heart-beat for Sybil's voice or footstep, which he hoped to hear across the open pass-door. She usually descended by the adjoining staircase, and he waited, and waited, and waited, but met with no audible sign of the woman he loved. The rustle of a dress reached his ear, and quickened his pulse to a feverish speed, but it was only a chorus-woman,

belated beyond her time, who came down the principal staircase.

The fireman going his rounds flashed his lantern at him.

‘Oh, it’s you, Mr. Miller,’ said the man. ‘You are not waiting for Miss Collier, are you? because, if you are, she’s gone a good while ago.’

‘Gone?’ asked Miller. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Quite sure,’ replied the man. ‘She asked me to call a cab for her, and she’s gone away in that.’

She had not gone away in his brougham; she had not softened nor yielded a jot, and he felt so heartsore and so low-spirited. Would he be able to continue the fight? Would he be strong enough for this contest of endurance?

He went to one of the fashionable restaurants, and endeavoured to steady his nerves by draughts from a magnum of champagne. A noisy, chattering crowd of young men about town and gaily-dressed women filled the place, and some of them spoke to him, and questioned him, and asked him why he was alone, and why he came to the place.

He felt disgusted with himself for having gone there at all, and blamed himself severely. What

would Sybil say when she had heard that he had gone to one of the fashionable night restaurants? What excuse would he be able to offer? And his conscience answered 'None.'

From the restaurant he went to the club. The talk was still about the disturbance of the afternoon. And there again he was persecuted by inquiries, by pretended consolations, by suggestions of all kinds, of advice which he neither relished nor heeded. He would have given anything in the world had he been able to pick a quarrel with anybody, and at that moment he would have proved a dangerous customer to deal with. He swallowed three glasses of whisky-and-water one after another as quickly as he had drunk the champagne, and he felt no steadier for that. His grief settled itself around his heart like a cold and humid fog, and dulled his understanding and his senses. A friend challenged him to a game of billiards, and he leapt at the offer with a sudden gladness. He would have joyfully done anything for a change. He played the game extremely well for an amateur, and yet on this night he missed the balls so often that he lost his temper with himself over that even, and left the room disgusted and sad. His brougham

was waiting for him at the door, and he drove home hardly knowing what he was doing.

The morning's awakening brought no more brightness than the preceding night had granted him. He rushed at his letters as a famished man might fly at a loaf that is held out to him, but there was no note from Sybil among them.

'How many days am I to pass like this?' he said to himself. 'Brewster may be right in the end, but I shall not be able to stand it, I'm afraid; and what's more, I don't want to stand it. It would kill me before I got it over.'

He sat over his untouched breakfast for an hour or more, and then started the day as he had finished the preceding one, with the only solace he could think of—whisky-and-water. A bad beginning, indeed, at any time, and a worse just then, for he was not in the best of health. He was not a man habitually addicted to heavy drinking; far from it. Whatever sin he could have charged himself with on this account in previous years, since his acquaintance with Sybil at least, his indulgence in strong liquors had been moderate. But the terribly mistaken notion acquired during his University career, that nothing steadies a man's shaken

nerves so much of a morning as a stiff tumbler of brandy or whisky and soda, had clung to him, and, like most men who keep late hours, he had resorted to it so often that at last he believed firmly in the imaginary, vicious, deceptive and only temporarily stimulating relief the early morning glass brought to him.

His colour, at no time too florid, had become pallid in one night, and his fingers shook as he poured out the liquor.

‘Why is she treating me like this?’ he cried to himself in a petty, febrile wrath. ‘I have never done her harm, and if I have offended her, surely there are a hundred proofs that I love her to set against that one fault. There’s more in that than meets the eye, I think. Somebody is inciting her against me, I think. Somebody is trying to part us. She would never act like that of her own account—never—never—never, I am sure.’

And the trembling fingers wandered again in the direction of the cut-glass carafe containing the whisky. The glass was filled again, and yet again, and the poor fellow became angrier with himself and the world as the supposed remedy brought no relief.

‘I know what I’ll do,’ he muttered at last ; ‘I’ll put the question to Brewster. He is shrewd, and he is a good friend of mine, and he’ll put himself out of the way to help me to get at the bottom of all this. If anybody is trying to part Sybil and me he’ll help me to find it out, and he’ll do it soon too.’

He dressed himself, and having ordered his brougham, drove to the Royal Charing Cross Theatre.

X.

‘My dear boy,’ said his kind and affable and good friend Brewster, when Miller had given him an exposition of his fears and doubts, ‘if you can’t keep on with it, stop it. Go to her and tell her that you want to make it up, that you’ll do anything to make it up—or whatever you care to say.’

‘But suppose she won’t see me, what then?’ Herbert asked anxiously.

‘How am I to know?’ rejoined the business-manager with an air of offended dignity. ‘You come to me for advice. I give it. Then you come back and tell me that you won’t follow it, and ask for more advice. What’s the good of that?’

‘Don’t say *won’t* follow it, old man,’ pleaded the poor fellow. ‘I want to follow it, but it’s too hard. Don’t cut up rough with me. I’m afraid, if I were to go to her, she wouldn’t see me.’

‘That’s most likely,’ answered Brewster, with a shrug of his ample shoulders, and an elevation of his scanty eyebrows. ‘But go to her, by all means; she’ll see then how badly you want to make it up.’

‘And you think that in that case she will keep me waiting all the longer,’ suggested the lovelorn swain.

‘Don’t ask *me*—what’s the good of it?’ replied Brewster. ‘Perhaps she may—perhaps she mayn’t; I think she may.’

‘I’ve got something else to ask your advice upon, old man,’ went on the heartbroken Miller. ‘It has just struck me that somebody may be trying to part her and me.’

The man of business sat back in his writing-chair, and for a moment an air of doubt and inquiry settled over his face. His little blinking eyes twitched, and his lips opened as in surprise. Then a smile—an ambiguous grin, rather—gradually spread over his rotund features.

‘By Jove!’ he exclaimed; ‘that’s an idea. You may be right. What has put that in your head? How did you come to think of that? Whom do you suspect?’

‘I don’t know how I came to think of it,’ replied Miller; ‘and I don’t suspect anybody’—the ponderous one drew a long breath—‘and I want you to help me to find out who it is.’

‘Oh, that I will, if it’s so, and gladly, too,’ exclaimed the business-manager, with an effusive heartiness. ‘Let me think—let me think. Who can it be? Who can have an interest in parting you and the girl?’

‘I can’t suggest anybody. I thought for a moment it might be Watson’—the little eyes blinked more rapidly and nervously—‘but, then, I said to myself it can’t be Watson. He spoke so kindly, and acted in so manly a way—and—I’m quite sure it isn’t Watson.’

‘Oh no, it isn’t Watson,’ retorted Brewster. ‘If he’d want to get at the girl, he wouldn’t do it in that way. Besides, I know that he’s on quite a different tack just now. Just let me consider. Who can it be?—who can it be?’

His face brightened, and he struck his open palm with his clenched fist.

‘I’ve got it!’ he cried. ‘I think I’ve got it. If it’s anybody, it’s that old cat, Miss Northcote.’

‘Miss Northcote?’ echoed Miller doubtfully.

‘Yes, Miss Northcote ; nobody but she, you may swear,’ answered the other.

‘But, for goodness’ sake, why?’ asked the young man.

‘She hates the girl,’ answered Brewster. ‘She has tried to injure her in every way, and has failed. It was she who helped most to spread the lying reports about her being found in Watson’s rooms. Depend upon it, she is at the bottom of the whole business.’

‘But what can she gain by doing it?’ was the anxious question.

‘Heaven alive, man ! can’t you see it?’ cried the big man. ‘You are rich. You are known to fling your money all over the girl. You’re a great catch for any marriageable woman. And if that Jezebel can part you and Sybil, she’ll think herself revenged for having been turned out of this theatre.’

‘This business is too deep for me,’ said Miller, shaking his head. ‘I shall never see clear in it. And how can I find out ? How can I prove it?’

‘You’re not likely to prove it, my dear boy,’ was the inconsolatory reply. ‘She’s been found out once over the first-night business, and she’ll take better care this time.’

‘Then what do you advise me to do?’ asked the poor man desperately.

‘I’ve told you before,’ answered Brewster, ‘and I repeat it now. Do nothing. Wait. If you can’t do that, do what you like; but don’t come to me again.’

‘And you really think I’d better wait?’

‘Of course I do, my boy. Mark my words: if you hurry this business, you’ll come to grief. Depend upon it, my boy, she’ll not give you up so easily. You’re far too rich for that. Girls don’t find Herbert Millers every day.’

He acknowledged the wisdom of Brewster’s advice, and went home, heartsore and wretched, to follow it.

It was a shame, a beastly shame, he thought, that a wicked woman, out of simple spite towards Sybil, should endeavour to wreck his happiness. He felt that he was powerless, and had to let things go as they would. He had no proof. He stretched himself full length upon his sofa, and when his servant brought his lunch, he ate merely a dozen of oysters, and sent back the rest of the solid food, emptying, on the other hand, a bottle and a pint of champagne.

The meal barely over, he fell asleep. He woke with a splitting headache when it was already quite dark.

He shivered, in spite of the great fire that burned brightly in the grate, and his head felt as if it were many sizes too large for him, and as if heavy round knobs were hammering against the inside of his cranium. His fingers were like ice, and his forehead burned and his ears tingled.

‘I’m in a mess,’ he said to himself, ‘and no mistake. It’s very unkind of Sybil. I wouldn’t have treated her like that.’

Then it struck him that he *was* treating her in exactly the manner which he had so reproachfully termed heartless, and the thought showed him his offence in a new enormity.

‘Brewster may be right,’ he said ; ‘but hang me if I go on with it ! I never saw it in that light. I wouldn’t be guilty of it for worlds. No, I’ll speak to Sybil, whatever comes of it. She can only tell me to go. And better to know it and have it over than this horrible state.’

His shaking fingers wandered about again searching for the decanter. He knew of no other relief

to which he could fly. The whisky-bottle is certainly not a spring where

‘Shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again,’

and yet the foolish theory is in much favour among hard drinkers, that when a man’s nerves are shaken by an undue consumption of strong liquor, the best way of steadying them is to take more whisky. The want of nourishing food, and the indulgence in ardent spirits, had told upon him. When he examined his face in the mirror, he found that it was haggard, drawn and pallid, the eyes sunken, the lips bloodless, and he acknowledged to himself that he was not a prepossessing picture of manhood.

‘A sight I do look!’ he said to himself; ‘but there’s no help for it. I’m bound to see her. I can’t keep up any longer. I don’t care what she’ll say; I don’t care what she’ll do. I’m in for it now. So here goes, neck or nothing.’

He put on his evening dress and strolled out. The night was foggy, cold and chill, and he shivered in his thin patent-leather shoes as he stepped on to the pavement. He hailed a passing

hansom. A glance at his watch told him that it was past seven o'clock.

'To the Charing Cross Theatre,' he cried, and the vehicle sped away.

Sybil had in the meantime followed the conduct of her lover with amazement. When she saw him in the corridor, and she noticed how repentant he looked, how eager for a kindly word from her, and how grieved by her refusal to speak to him, her heart softened towards him, and she chided herself for being so angry with him.

'He's only a great fool,' she said to herself. 'He's good enough, and true enough, and staunch enough, but he has not the way about him to show it; and he looks so sorry.'

Then, as the thoughts faded, she pictured Randolph Watson to herself—handsome where the other was plain, passionate where the other was sluggish, fiery where the other was slow and cold; brave, clever, a genius, a man among men. On the one side gold—she thought little at the moment of the true, honest heart—on the other talent, art, fame, the applause of thousands. And the balances dipped and rose, first on that side, and then on this; and at last a grain of woman's pity turned

the scale. It would break poor Herbert's heart if she jilted him, she said to herself; and Herbert Miller, uneven teeth, shaggy, rebellious moustache, lanky, uncouth figure, eyeglass and all, won the contest.

So, when the curtain descended, and she returned to her dressing-room, she was ready to forgive and to be forgiven. She dressed herself quickly. Herbert was usually waiting at the door when she was ready, but her dresser, peering out into the landing, told her of his absence. What did it mean? Was there ever a man so irritating, so horrid? She could not be expected to run after him, surely. Here was a new offence, a new grievance. She went out and ordered the astonished woman to get the fireman to fetch her a cab.

'Won't you wait for Mr. Miller, miss?' asked the woman. 'He is in the theatre.'

'No,' answered Sybil. 'Be quick. Get me a cab.'

'But the brougham is at the door, miss,' continued the woman. 'Won't you take that?'

'You heard what I said, Mrs. Gordon,' retorted Sybil. 'Get me a cab.'

The vehicle was fetched, and Sybil drove away.

Was there ever so perverse, so stubborn, so dreadful, so offensive a man as Miller? Here she was ready to forgive, and he would not come to be forgiven, thus inflicting insult and injury at the same time, heaping Ossas upon Pelions of wrong-doing.

‘Well,’ she said, tossing her pretty head in a defiant emphasis, which boded ill for the luckless Miller, ‘if he thinks that I’ll run after him, he’ll wait a long time. Mr. Watson would not have done that.’

In every comparison between Herbert and Watson, the latter came off an easy victor, and Sybil was happy for the moment by the consolation that, if she parted with her old love, there was the new—the delightful, the delicious, the exquisite new, ready for the asking; yea, without the asking.

Watson lived in St. John’s Wood, and he had no more business in Clapham than in the moon. Yet—so strange are the amenities of a theatrical manager’s occupation—that on the following morning an unexpected and delicate mission took him to the south of London. He was one of the Vice Presidents of the Actors’ Charitable Fund, and a case had come before the committee on the previous

day which demanded his personal inquiry and attention. The widow of an old actor had applied for relief. Watson had been personally acquainted with the old actor. On such occasions it was usual for the secretary to make all necessary research, but on that early morning Watson was struck by the sudden thought that he was the person most fit and proper to call upon and question the old lady. He drove to the office and stated his view to the secretary, who was only too glad to be relieved of his share of the business, especially by so prominent a member of the committee as Mr. Watson.

The old lady lived in a street off the Clapham Road. Sybil lived *in* the Clapham Road. What more natural, then, than that Mr. Watson, being in the immediate neighbourhood, should not pass Sybil's house without calling upon her. It was not only excusable, it was an act of simple courtesy.

Sybil, like Herbert Miller on his part, had expected to receive a note from her lover that morning. None came, and she was sorely perplexed. She was more puzzled than annoyed, for this silence, this contemptuous disdain, was so strange to Miller's character as she knew it and

understood it, that it made her pause and wonder.

‘That’s not at all like Herbert,’ she said to herself; ‘he’s been put up to that. He would never act like this,’ she continued, after a pause of thoughtful reflection. ‘Somebody has been advising him. It’s a woman, I bet.’

Her little fingers tightened as the idea suggested itself to her.

‘Ah!’ she cried; ‘that’s it—some woman. What woman?’ and she puzzled her head for fully ten minutes in mentally going over the list of the ladies into whose trap the unwary Miller might have fallen.

In the midst of her cogitation Watson appeared upon the scene, smiling serenely, handsome as ever, the very picture of a desirable lover.

‘I am so glad you have called, Mr. Watson,’ said Sybil, offering her white hand, which the manager kissed with a delicious mock courtesy; ‘I particularly want to ask you a question.’

‘I am at your service,’ answered the glowing Watson.

‘I want to know,’ continued Sybil, ‘if you saw Mr. Miller last night?’

‘ Oh, certainly ; I saw him several times.’

‘ Where ?’

‘ At the theatre, first of all.’

‘ Did he say anything to you about me ?’

‘ Nothing that I can remember ; nothing particular, at any rate.’

‘ He made no remark ? He did not ask about me ?’

‘ No.’

‘ Was he in the theatre when I left it ?’

‘ Certainly. You must have seen his brougham at the stage-door.’

‘ Of course I did. And where did you see him afterwards ?’

‘ At Belloni’s.’

‘ At the supper-rooms ? Do you go there, Mr. Watson ?’

‘ Not very often. I went there last night for a minute or two merely.’

‘ And Mr. Miller was there ? Was he alone ?’

‘ He was sitting at a table with two ladies and another gentleman.’

Now this was the bare naked truth, but Watson knew very well that the man and the two women had sat down at Herbert’s table for the reason that the place was full, and every other seat occupied.

‘Oh, indeed!’ exclaimed Sybil. ‘And what was he doing?’

‘He was drinking champagne.’

‘And he seemed to be enjoying himself?’

‘Oh yes.’

Tears of rage pearled in Sybil’s eyes.

‘Don’t you think, Mr. Watson,’ she said, with a cold wrath at her heart, ‘that Miller is a wretch?’

‘I won’t go so far as to say that, my dear Miss Collier,’ answered the cunning Watson; ‘but I think he has acted very unkindly towards you.’

His arm was around her waist again as he was sitting by her side on the soft couch.

‘Why do you grieve about him?’ he asked tenderly; ‘are you so very, very fond of him?’

‘Fond of him!’ she cried, with a stamp of the tiny satin-slippered foot; ‘I hate him!’ and she looked at that moment as if she meant it in downright earnest.

‘Don’t say that,’ rejoined Watson, snaking his arm about her with an insinuating pressure; ‘you know you like him very much. Indeed, if it were otherwise you would have more pity upon poor me.’

‘You men are all alike,’ answered Sybil. ‘You

see in my annoyance an opportunity which may possibly serve you.'

'How cruel you are to me!' he whispered soothingly.

'I'm not cruel,' she replied; 'but I'll be just before I'm generous.'

'Why not be generous to me,' he asked, 'to me who love you as much as he—ay, more than he ever was, or is, or will be capable of?'

His hand was upon hers, his eyes peered into hers, glowing and gleaming. His contact always thrilled her, but at that moment it shot through her like an electric ripple. An instant more, what she might have done, or what she might have conceded, she knew not; but a presentiment, strange and instantaneous, an inexplicable dread of wrongdoing—whether it were womanly truth, or some remaining spark of faith in her lover—checked her. She withdrew her hand, and gently slipped from Watson's supple arm.

'No,' she said quietly, 'I'll be just first of all.'

'Then there is no hope for me?' he pleaded.

'I will not go so far as to say that,' she replied; 'but you must have patience. We women are weak creatures, you know, and we have our whims

and our foibles. You must humour me, and perhaps——’

‘Perhaps what? What were you going to say?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps one day I may be less cruel to you, as you call it.’

She passed the rest of the day in weighing her doubts. She had an inborn sense of equity which told her that after all there might be something hidden from her which might explain everything.

Miller could not have changed in so short a space of time as to be one day worthy to become her husband and the next day totally unworthy. She would let the day pass, and see what the evening brought; much might be accounted for, much evidence might be adduced, to make her think more leniently of the young man.

She arrived at the theatre in the evening, and found Miller waiting for her in the passage.

He had been further steadying his nerves after the manner of the past twenty-four hours, with additional whisky-and-water. He leaned against the whitewashed wall, with his crush-hat partly at the back of his head, his white tie hanging disorderly across his shirt-front, with his hands in his

trousers-pockets, his face white, his lips babbling, and his eyes leering.

‘Sybil!’ he cried, as the girl was about to pass.

She looked at him and shuddered. His breath was redolent with alcohol, and the evidences of intoxication were unmistakable.

‘I suppose this is the continuation of last night’s debauch,’ she said bitterly. ‘Good-evening.’

He launched a fumbling arm, and caught her by her mantle.

‘One moment—one second—Sybil,’ he hic-coughed.

‘Please let me pass,’ she cried imperiously. ‘Don’t come near me. Never come near me again.’

In another moment she was gone; and Miller, staring about him helplessly and vacantly, could only babble a few incoherent words, among which ‘Shame! deuced shame!’ were partly distinguishable.

When Sybil reached her dressing-room she sat down and cried bitterly. On a sudden she rose and wiped her eyes.

‘It is all over now,’ she said firmly. ‘Thank God, it is all over!’

XI.

WHEN Miller woke on the following morning he was very ill indeed. The previous evening was a blank to him except for the hard damning knowledge that he had not been sober, and that, while in that shameful state, he had met Sybil. But what else he did in the theatre, when he left it, how he reached home, when he reached home, when he went to bed, and how he went to bed, he knew not.

He was so feverish and so prostrated that his servant, without further ado, fetched his physician.

‘Oh dear, oh dear!’ exclaimed the man of science when he had examined his patient, ‘how often have I preached to you about this wicked remedy, which is worse than the ill itself! You have been suffering from a severe nervous prostration, and you fly to intoxicating liquors for relief. It has the

same effect as if you were to place your feet into a pailful of ice and to put a shovelful of red-hot coals on your head. It is madness, my dear sir, sheer madness. You must promise me never to do it again.'

Miller felt so ill, and so miserable, and so wretched, and his head throbbed so, and his lips were so parched, and his throat pricked him so, and his fingers trembled so, and such a horrid cold shiver shook him from time to time, that he would have given worlds for a drink of whisky-and-soda. But the doctor was inexorable. He confiscated all the ardent liquor in the room, and ordered the servant to take it to the pantry, and on no account to allow his master to have a drop.

Miller lay on his bed inconsolable, feverish, with aching limbs and aching heart. What was he to do now? Sybil would despise him. Things had gone wrong with a vengeance, and he could blame nobody but himself. He could certainly not blame Brewster. He had asked for his advice, and had not only not followed it, but had made a fool and a show of himself. Brewster had been right, of that he had no doubt, and he alone was at fault. He and that wicked Miss Northcote, who had turned

Sybil's mind against him out of mere woman's malice and woman's spite.

All that day and all through that night he lay in bed, and suffered in body and in mind. It happened that not a soul called upon him, although at other times his chambers were full of visitors. The enforced quiet, the abstention from strong drink, the medicine and the simple regime prescribed, soon brought about a change for the better, and on the following morning he was able to rise and walk about the room. He was very weak still, but the effort of movement roused and invigorated him.

During all this while he had no note, no message, no news from Sybil. He sent his servant to the theatre to obtain information, but the man was a simple-minded old soldier, unaccustomed to stage-door intrigue, and he learned nothing.

He sat down a dozen times or more to write to Sybil, but in his despair he was unable to compose a letter that seemed to him at all likely to appease the offended lady. He tore the epistles one after the other, and threw the pieces into the fire. Then he would fold his hands, and wring them in his mental agony, and with vacant gaze search among the

gleaming coals in the grate for a spark of hope to light his night of misery.

At last, after one mighty effort, he managed to dash off a few lines, which seemed to him to embody what he wanted to say.

‘MY DEAREST’ (he wrote),

‘I am so sorry for having acted as I have done. I was worse than foolish, I was wicked; but, believe me, my faults were faults of head, and not of heart. I sinned because I loved you so, and I was too miserable to know that I was acting wrongly. Forgive me, dearest, and you shall never again have cause for complaint.

‘Your heartbroken lover,

‘HERBERT.’

That night he slept soundly. The message of peace he had sped towards his love left its comforting warmth about his heart, and he felt that now for the first time he had done what common-sense and manly courtesy ought to have dictated to him long ago. Brewster had advised him, and Brewster, he felt sure now, had been wrong; but his big friend had acted with the best of intentions, and, from his point of view, with reason and

acumen. But Brewster, his knowledge of the world and of women notwithstanding, had undoubtedly been wrong.

The night's sleep brought calmness to his mind, strength to his nerves, clearness to his mental sight, and new vigour to his body. He felt strong enough again to meet Sybil, to face the world, its calumnies and its stings.

He was in quite a happy mood as he sat over his breakfast of ham and eggs and tea and toast, and he thought he had not eaten such a hearty meal for a long time. He was singing in his accustomed piping falsetto a stave of a popular burlesque song when his servant brought him a big packet and a note.

Sybil's writing was on the envelope and on the cover. Herbert's blood rushed through his veins, and his fingers shook as in a palsy as he opened the note.

'Miss Collier,' it ran, 'presents her compliments to Mr. Miller, and begs to return the mementoes of an acquaintance which has been brought to so abrupt a close by Mr. Miller's conduct. Miss Collier requests Mr. Miller to consider their acquaintance at an end.'

All the gifts, all the trinkets he had given her, from her engagement - ring to the rivi re of diamonds, were there. He felt a tear brimming in his eye and running over his cheek.

‘Well, if it’s all over,’ he said to himself in a cold dismay, ‘it can’t be helped. I shall feel better soon, now that I know the worst. Brewster’s right, after all. There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and there are other girls besides Sybil Collier in the world.’

He knew that he was lying to himself, trying to deceive himself about his own heart’s stinging pain. He made a desperate effort to feel calm and collected, and succeeded in arriving at a wretched semblance of composure.

He longed to find somebody to whom to confide his trouble. It would ease his mind to speak about it. A name rose to his lips, the name of a friend whom he had long neglected, and whom, as he now thought, he ought to have consulted. He had not been to see Barnaby Walker for weeks. Walker had always been kind and true to him. They had been schoolfellows, although Barnaby was three or four years his senior, and they had remained friends ever since. Barnaby knew

theatrical people better than most men out of the profession. He might have something to suggest. Yes, he would go and see Barnaby Walker.

The day was cold and foggy. The gas was flaring in shops, in offices, and in private rooms, though it was late forenoon. The acrid humidity settled itself about his throat as he went into the street, and made him feel even more cheerless than before. He walked on leisurely for awhile, not looking to the right nor to the left, until his own coachman, whom in his wretchedness he had forgotten, and who had followed him, stopped the vehicle by the kerb at his side, and asked whether he had no orders. He thanked the man with a vacant smile, and ordered him to drive to Barnaby Walker's chambers in Clement's Inn.

The great critic laughed at him for his folly. He told him that he was a fool for taking it so to heart that Sybil had jilted him, that he was a bigger fool for having taken Brewster's advice; and when Miller told him that Brewster had mentioned Miss Northcote as the probable instigator of the mischief, he roared outright.

'The man is either a rogue or an ass, I should think,' said Walker. 'A little bit of both most

likely. Why should Miss Northcote interfere between you and Miss Collier?’

‘She hates her for having taken her place at the Charing Cross,’ suggested Miller.

‘Bosh! And even if she wanted to separate you, in what manner would she set to work?’ asked the man of letters. ‘It’s much more likely a scheme of Brewster’s and Watson’s. I don’t think much of Brewster, but Watson, where a woman is concerned, is the most dastardly sweep in the theatrical profession. Don’t you fret about it, my friend. If the girl had been worth such a good, honest fellow as yourself she would have stuck to you.’

‘You don’t think, then, that Miss Northcote is at the bottom of all this?’ asked the still doubting Miller.

‘I have no patience with you!’ retorted Walker. ‘But I’ll prove it to you. I’m going to the *matinée* at the Lyceum this afternoon; I have a box. You shall come with me. Miss Northcote is sure to be there, and then I’ll get her to come to my box and you shall speak to her yourself.’

‘Oh, my dear fellow, I wouldn’t for anything in the world,’ answered Miller in a frightened voice. ‘I couldn’t.’

‘Indeed. I insist,’ replied Walker; ‘you will

have to do it. You have accused this lady of doing you wilful wrong, and it is only right and manly that you should give her a chance of clearing herself.'

Miller protested that he would not do his friend's bidding. He had had his fill of the whole business, and wanted if possible to brush it from his mind, he said, as if he had been possessed of the strength of purpose for such a task. The conversation was taking a quieter turn, when a ring of the hall-bell announced visitors, and the servant, entering the room, informed her master that Miss Northcote wished to see him.

'You can't get out of it now,' said Walker. 'You will have to see the business through, that's all.'

Miller, ill at his ease, ensconced himself in the farthest corner of a big couch, and pretended to be deeply engaged in the perusal of a book when the stately actress entered the room.

'You know my friend Herbert Winthrop Miller, of course?' said Walker, after the usual formal courtesies.

The young man had risen, and was standing there, a picture of abject discomfort. Miss Northcote merely bowed.

'I have seen Mr. Miller,' she replied, 'though I never had the pleasure of being introduced to him.'

‘That is strange,’ returned Walker. ‘My friend thinks that you have taken a considerable interest in his affairs.’

The unfortunate Miller would have given a hundred pounds to be out of the room, and away from the searching glance of that woman.

‘What do you mean, Mr. Walker?’ she asked. ‘I don’t understand you.’

‘I’ll come to the point at once, Miss Northcote,’ said Walker, ‘for it is purposeless to beat about the bush. Mr. Miller thinks that you have had a hand in instigating his quarrel with Miss Collier, which has led to their separation.’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the actress, ‘you amaze me, Mr. Walker. They are separated then? But I am surprised that Mr. Miller should think so ill of me. I have heard about their quarrel—who has not? It is the talk of the profession. About Miss Collier I know nothing but what I heard from Mrs. Horace Grantham’s own lips.’

‘And that is——?’ gasped Miller.

‘Mrs. Horace Grantham and Miss Wentholme surprised Miss Collier and Mr. Randolph Watson alone in a private room at Mr. Brewster’s chambers after the dinner given by the latter. Both these

ladies vouch for the fact that they found them in such a position as left no doubt about their previous conduct, and they both showed their indignation at Miss Collier's behaviour by immediately leaving the place.'

So this, then, was the explanation of the origin of the trouble. Sybil was not so stainless, after all; and Watson was a traitor—Watson and Brewster both.

'You assure me, upon your word of honour,' said Miller, with a quiet intensity totally at variance with his previous excitement, 'that you state simple fact?'

'Absolute fact, my dear Mr. Miller,' answered the lady. 'But you can easily question Miss Wentholme and Mrs. Horace Grantham. They will corroborate what I state. And, more than that: don't believe any of us. Believe only your own eyes. Follow the girl—have her watched, or watch her yourself—and you will soon see that it is Mr. Randolph Watson who has taken your place. You will see that it is he who drives and walks about with her, who takes her to lunch and to dinner; and other proofs will, I have no doubt, speedily follow.'

The poor fellow did not know what to think. Everybody told him a different story. Which was

he to believe? Whom was he to believe? This last version bore an impress of actuality and of truth. Yes, he would judge with his own eyes. If Sybil were so false, she was not worth his troubling his peace about her.

But with all that he loved her. He tried to convince himself that he no longer cared for her, but failed disastrously. The girl's image had twined itself around his heart. It had become part of his existence, and he could no more grasp it and cast it from him than he could have cut the flesh from his bones without feeling the hurt.

He was no longer excited, but calm—wretchedly, miserably, calm. A cold, creeping sensation clung to him, and seemed to gnaw into his sinews and his bones. His voice became rough, and though he tried hard to speak composedly, he found mostly gutturals among all the letters of the alphabet.

And in his dull, cold, bleak misery he must needs fly to the remedy that before had proved worse than the disease. Whisky! whisky! As he had craved for whisky to steady his shaken nerves, so he thirsted for whisky to warm his heart, to drive chill pain and discomfort away.

He returned to his chambers, and sat down with

a freshly-opened bottle, and greedily swallowed glass after glass. The more he drank the more he wanted. It ran through his veins, it quickened his sluggard heart-beat, it brought a horrid false gaiety to his tongue, it made his eyes sparkle with an unreal lustre, and he thought, poor benighted man ! that in it he would be able to drown his troubles.

He sat there with folded hands, and stared into the fire until the glowing coals assumed fantastic shapes to his eyes, and danced and whirled about him in a droll and ludicrous revelry. Sybil was there, and he was with her ; and she said all sorts of silly things to him—things so absurd that he laughed about them ; and he remembered not the time when he had been so merry, nor she either. And then a cloud of black, loathsome smoke arose, as from the bowels of the earth, and it spread like a pall of gloom between him and Sybil, and he could no longer see her, nor hear her speak. And then he saw fiery flashes in the midst of the black smoke, and the cloud widened and engulfed him ; and he felt as if a cold clammy hand were gripping him by the throat and choking him ; and he screamed aloud in a cold terror, and woke from his horrid day-dream.

‘I can’t stand this,’ he said to himself, shaking himself together, whilst a cold perspiration pearled on his forehead. ‘I’ll go out. I’ll go to the theatre. I’ll most likely learn something there.’

Before leaving his rooms he flew again to his whisky-and-water. He thought he felt steadier and better after that, though for a moment, as he looked around the room, he imagined that the clock on the mantelpiece was wobbling about with a rollicking, swaying motion, and that the big candelabra were keeping time with it. But that unaccountable and unusual sight seemed to possess little interest for him. ‘What next?’ he merely said to himself. ‘I am going cranky, I suppose.’

The theatre was still closed in front when he reached it, and he went round to the stage-door in the street at the back. The hall-keeper, a bluff and hearty old soldier, was alone in his little room. He had had many a half-crown, and many a half-sovereign too, from Miller, and was effusive in his welcome.

‘Haven’t seen you for some days, sir,’ he said. ‘Heard you wasn’t well. Hope nothing serious, sir.’

‘Oh, I’m all right enough,’ answered Miller,

seating himself on a rickety chair. 'Have you seen Miss Collier to-day?'

'Not to-day, sir, as I know on,' answered the hall-keeper. 'She hasn't been here to-day.'

'And last night?'

'Oh, last night, sir—she was here, of course, sir—as usual, sir.'

'And did she—did she go away by herself?'

The man hesitated. Miller, he knew, was one of Randolph Watson's partners. He was aware of Sybil's quarrel with Miller, but he was afraid of committing an indiscretion.

'Well, you see, sir, it ain't none o' my business. And—I really don't like to say, sir.'

'What nonsense, man!' retorted Miller. 'Out with it. Did she go away by herself?'

'Well, no, sir—not exactly, sir. She went away with Mr. Watson, sir.'

'Oh, and does she always go with—Mr. Watson now?'

'I don't know, sir. You see, I'm only on duty till eleven-thirty, sir, and the fireman takes charge of the hall after that.'

'They don't always leave, then, before eleven-thirty?'

'Not always, sir. But the fireman, he can tell

you, sir, if you was to ask him. Thank you kindly, sir,' he added, as he took a coin which Miller handed him. 'I do hope as you ain't taking this thing to heart, sir. We've been a-saying, all of us—if you don't mind me a-saying it, sir—that we do hope as it won't make no difference in your coming to the theatre, sir, for we all do like to see you, sir—all of us.'

Here was proof, undeniable proof, that he had been betrayed. He had been betrayed by her whom he loved so well, and by the man who pretended to be his friend. His mind was muddled, but he had strange intervals of clearness; cold, nearly imbecile indifference varied with peevish annoyance in his bosom.

The strangest part of his strange feelings was that he was not angry with Sybil. He shivered when he thought of her, and he felt sick at heart; but he had no reproach for her. He felt about her much as a child would do about a doll which it has broken. He was sorry that his idol was shattered, but he could not at all understand how it came to be destroyed, nor by whom. The broken head of a doll was never a greater mystery to a baby than Sybil's breach of faith was to Herbert Miller at that moment.

He became so grief-hardened and strong in his forlorn state that, had anybody come to him and told him that Sybil was close by on Watson's arm, he would barely have raised his head to look. The only thing which bothered and distressed him was that he felt so cold, and that things, inanimate objects—now a chair, then a broom that was leaning against the wall—would move about as of their own volition, and jump and rise into the air, and fall again with a silly and unnatural impulse. He could not explain it, and he did not try to explain it. It was too absurd, and he could not bother his head about such things.

There was a restaurant opposite the theatre, and he went into the private room there and sat down, and ordered a big meal from the plausibly-spoken, chattering waiter, without knowing what he had ordered. Oysters, and lobster *à l'américaine*, and fried sole, and little *vol au vents*, and roast turkey, and vegetables, and salad, and sweets, and cheese, and fruit, and champagne—above all champagne. He looked about him with a vacant leer, and when the food was brought to him, he ate two or three oysters and dropped others on the floor, and sent one dish after another away untouched; but he

finished his bottle of Perrier Jouet, and asked for and commenced another. He was well known in the place, and when his head commenced to rock to and fro like that of a porcelain mandarin, and then sank on to his breast, and at last fell upon his arms, that were spread upon the table, they left him to sleep as he liked, and even went so far as to move about the room with cautious and muffled footsteps so as not to awaken him.

It was past twelve o'clock when the room was required for a party. The plausible waiter came and gently shook Miller, who, waking with a start, looked about him in a forlorn amazement and rubbed his eyes.

'All right, all right, my man,' he muttered in answer to the obsequious excuses of the waiter. 'I'm going. Let me pull myself together for a moment or two, that's all.'

He paid his bill, and went with uncertain footsteps out into the night. He felt dazed, and his head seemed like a block of wood vibrating under a series of blows. He had to hold the doorpost to steady himself before stepping on to the slippery pavement.

Where was he to go? To the theatre, of course.

XII.

THE fireman was standing at the stage-door when Miller got there. He had been smoking, and this being against the rules, he had his short pipe behind his back, stammering an incoherent phrase of respect.

Through the open hall-door Miller could see that the place was dark and deserted. A single gas-jet, turned down to the blue nearly, gleamed faintly half-way up the passage, and another in the same manner further on, at the double door, which led into the theatre and to the dressing-room staircase.

‘Everybody gone?’ asked Miller, making a desperate effort to steady his rebellious legs, and finding himself reduced for comfort and safety to lean against the opposite doorpost.

‘Nearly everybody,’ replied the fireman. ‘But you don’t seem very well, Mr. Miller. Won’t you come into the hall and sit down?’

‘I think I will, fireman,’ answered Miller; and suiting the action to the word with a wonderful

alacrity, he went into the little room and sat down in the wooden armchair, where in the daytime the hall-keeper was enthroned.

The fireman turned up the gas, and the place assumed a brighter look.

‘So everybody isn’t gone yet?’ continued Miller, his mind bent on one object. His head seemed quite steady for the moment, though he was shaking in every limb as with a fever.

‘No, everybody isn’t gone,’ replied the man. ‘Mr. Watson’s still in the theatre.’

‘And Miss Collier?’ questioned Miller.

‘She’s there too,’ the fireman answered.

‘Do Mr. Watson and Miss Collier often stay here late like that?’

The fireman found himself in the predicament which had perplexed the hall-keeper before him. Miller had been very liberal to him: he knew the young man to be one of the managers, but Mr. Watson was his actual employer.

‘Oh, I really don’t know, Mr. Miller,’ he replied.

‘Come, now, fireman,’ said Miller, ‘you know well enough. Here, take that,’ he added, extending a feebly fumbling hand. ‘Do Mr. Watson and Miss Collier often stay here late like that?’

‘Well, since you’re so pressing,’ answered the

fireman, pocketing the proffered sovereign, 'I don't mind telling you on the strict Q.T. They've stayed here like that twice since you haven't been coming to the theatre.'

'And where are they now?' he asked quite unconcernedly; and his brain seemed clear enough on that one subject nearest to his heart.

'In Miss Collier's dressing-room, I suppose,' replied the fireman.

'Is Mrs. Gordon there?'

'She's gone long ago.'

'And Masters?'

'He's gone, too, this quarter of an hour.'

Miller did not know how it came about, but he did not feel pained—not even annoyed. A week ago, had such information been given him, he would have rushed upstairs and throttled Watson, and nothing short of physical violence would have appeased him. Now he thought it merely droll that Sybil should be up there with Watson instead of with him. He felt no grief, no anger, only a sensation like pinpoints pricking in his throat and a dryness upon his tongue.

'I'm awfully thirsty, fireman,' he said; 'don't you think you could get me a bottle of whisky somewhere?'

‘I might,’ answered the man, ‘if I could leave the hall. The pubs are closed by this time, but I could get a bottle at the Green Man. Only it might take a little time, because the police have been watching the place of a night, and the landlord’s afraid of being fined.’

‘I’ll take care of the hall for you,’ said Miller, opening his cigar-case and offering it to the fireman. ‘Take one to warm you on the road.’

He lit one himself and sat back in the big chair, puffing away heavily.

‘You’ll have to tell Mr. Watson that it’s been you smoking, Mr. Miller,’ urged the man, ‘else I might get the bullet. I wouldn’t go for anybody else, of course; but I’ll try for you.’

He felt assured that Miller had sufficient weight in the management to prevent his loss of employment or other injury. Besides that, he thought that neither Watson nor Miss Collier were likely to descend for another half-hour, and he could be back long before then.

‘I’ll leave you my lantern,’ he went on, ‘and I’d better close the hall-door. You’ll know it’s me when I knock at the window.’

Miller, sitting alone in the little room, began to fidget and feel cold and shivery. The objects

about the place seemed to move of their own accord—the framed regulations of the theatre swayed and rocked on the wall. The hall-keeper's old sword, which was suspended over the clock, wobbled and wriggled as if intending to tumble down upon him.

‘Hang it all!’ he said, ‘I can’t stand this any longer;’ and he took up the fireman’s lantern and went out into the passage.

In the Charing Cross Theatre the dressing-rooms, workshops, and stage-entrance occupied a building separate from the stage and auditorium—the carpenters’ and property shops on the ground-floor; and the dressing-rooms on the upper stories. Two staircases led to the upper floor—one near the stage, and another just behind the double-door at the further end of the hall-passage. The workshops were situated between the hall-keeper’s room and the last-mentioned staircase, and Miller, walking along the corridor, lantern in hand, stumbled against the insufficiently-closed door of the carpenters’ shop, which opened under the pressure, and he shot into the room, falling luckily on a pile of shavings that were swept together, ready to be taken away next morning.

Miller felt barely surprised when with difficulty

he picked himself together, and rose, stumbling and swaying, to his feet. His cigar had been extinguished, and he pulled out his box of fusees to light it again. One after the other of these failed to serve him, and, in his dull incapacity of apprehension, he flung them, some flaming, others cold, about the room. At last he succeeded in relighting his cigar, and, taking up the lantern, he stumbled to the door, which he closed behind him.

As he stood in the semi-darkness a ludicrous desire seized him to go upstairs and see Sybil and Watson. He was not in the least angry with either of them. It was the merest sense of curiosity that prompted him.

He reached the first floor after various and sundry adventures, nearly coming to grief twice by tumbling downward a step or two, and losing his cigar on the road. Once on the landing, he stumbled vacantly along the corridor where Sybil's dressing-room was situated. All was dark, and he heard no sound. As he flashed his lantern along the passage the walls appeared to rock, and he felt a ridiculous desire to push them back to prevent them from falling.

At last he found the door of Sybil's dressing-room and knocked. A half-stifled cry and a

scuffling of feet was the response, and, without further waiting, he turned the handle. He had been leaning helplessly against the door, and when his support moved and turned away from him, he fell full-length into the room, the lantern escaping from his hand.

Sybil was there, still attired in her dressing-wrapper, white as a sheet, and Watson, who glared at the young man in a speechless wonder and anger. Neither of them could find a word, only the girl clung to the man in frightened shame.

‘How dare you!’ cried Watson at last.

He thought that Miller’s condition gave him a physical superiority, though the young man was known to him to be a fine bruiser, and at any other time could have punished him severely. But Watson’s courage was only that of the bully. He was willing enough to attack a weak, worn-out *roué*, but Miller’s strength at that moment was an unknown quantity to him, and he dreaded to face it, his sense of the young man’s condition notwithstanding.

Miller, sitting with outstretched legs on the floor, leered at the pair with an imbecile grimace. His eyeglass was hanging on its silken cord, and he vainly endeavoured to fix it in his eye, and at last,

losing patience, he tore the silk and threw the offending object into the room.

‘How do you do, Sybil?’ he said with a hideous mockery of politeness, and still seated on the floor. ‘How do you do? Glad to see you. I suppose you’re not glad?’

Sybil’s courage returned.

‘Have you not disgraced yourself sufficiently in my eyes,’ she cried, ‘without coming here to do it? Leave my room! leave it this instant!’

‘All right, Sybil,’ replied Miller, with a ferocious effort to smile; ‘all right, my dear. I don’t want to disturb you. Only I must get up first.’

He struggled to his feet.

‘I’m very sorry, Sybil,’ he said, seating himself on a chair, and a strange sense of his trouble returning to his muddled brain. ‘I’m very sorry that I’ve offended you——’

‘This is no place to argue this question, Miller,’ retorted Watson, noticing with glad surprise the young man’s pacific tone and manner, ‘and you’re not in a fit state to argue it. You should really be ashamed to show yourself before Miss Collier in such a disgraceful condition. You’d better go home and get to sleep.’

‘I don’t want to go home,’ cried Miller with an

abrupt and sudden vehemence. 'I'm not going to leave you here to see Sybil home. I'm not, do you hear that?'

The girl's temper rose, and she clenched her little fists and bit her lips in anger.

'You will please, Mr. Miller,' she said in a quiet rage, 'leave *me* to decide with whom I shall go, and where I shall go, and where I shall stay, and who shall stay with me. If you do not leave this instant, I will call the fireman and have you turned out.'

Miller laughed aloud.

'The fireman!' he exclaimed. 'The fireman, you said? He isn't in the theatre.'

'And where is he, then? You seem to know,' demanded Watson angrily.

'He's gone to fetch me a bottle of whisky.'

'The fireman out of the theatre!' cried Watson furiously. 'And what's this—this smell? Why, there's something burning somewhere! I can smell it! Don't you notice the smoke?'

He rushed to the door and opened it, and an asphyxiating cloud spread into the room.

'My God!' he cried, 'the theatre's on fire!—the theatre's on fire!'

There could be no mistake. The column of

smoke became instantly blacker and denser, and Sybil, flying to the heavy curtains that were drawn across the window, tore them apart, and looked out into the night. A hideous glare shot across the panes, sparks dashed, whirled, and danced in the little inaccessible courtyard that, shaft-like, had been constructed for light and air, whilst great clouds of smoke mingled with the fierce element. Out on the landing the sounds of crackling and hissing became louder and drew nearer.

Watson with an oath rushed into the passage, and immediately returned gasping for breath.

‘Close the door!’ he cried, ‘close the door, else we shall be suffocated! The place is choke full of smoke!’

His face was blanched and his teeth rattled. He sat down helplessly on a chair, and wiped a cold perspiration from his forehead.

‘But, Mr. Watson!’ exclaimed Sybil, ‘we shall have to get away from here, else we shall all be burned. You know the theatre better than I do. Do please show us the way.’

‘How did this come about?’ Watson cried in a hoarse fury. ‘The fire’s in the carpenters’ shop, and it’s coming up the staircase. Let’s make a dash for the front of the house and try to get on to

the dress-circle lobby. Put a handkerchief over your mouth to keep out the smoke,' he added, 'and we'll make a dive for it. Come!'

The girl held out her hand to him and he gripped it. He darted into the corridor with her, but the staircase beyond was a hell of heat and sparks, and the smoke choked and blinded them.

'Not a little bit of use this way,' he gasped, and they rushed back into the room again, closing the door behind them against the onslaught of the asphyxiating black cloud.

Miller had been sitting on a chair, staring about him with a frigid indifference.

'The theatre's on fire,' he muttered to himself. 'That's very awful, isn't it?'

Not the slightest sense of the mortal danger in which he and his companions were placed penetrated his drink-sodden mind.

'I wonder what's to be done,' he went on to himself. 'I haven't the least idea what to do; but Watson knows.'

Gradually the grip of the smoke caught his throat, and the pungent odour of the burning stimulated his cerebration to a more normal activity.

Whilst Watson and Sybil were out of the room,

and he was for the space of a few moments alone, a mighty sheet of flame shot past the window, rushing and roaring and seething in its fiendish riot of sound and of glare. The panes cracked and broke with the heat, and the fire crept in and licked the window-sill and the curtains there with its red tongues. He stared at the phenomenon with bursting eyes, and it sobered him. With a swiftness explicable only to those who have themselves faced mortal terrors, his reasoning powers returned to him, his appreciation of right and wrong, his perception of things about him, and of persons in his presence.

Sybil flashed back into the room, a white figure of fear, clinging to the arm of the man who had taken her from him. The thought surged from his heart to fly at Watson's throat and to fling him headlong into the roaring flames, but when he saw the man, trembling like an aspen leaf, grayfaced, and with protruding eyes, he knew him for a craven cur, and he so despised him that he stayed his hand.

The curtains were already ablaze, and he flew towards them and tore them down and stamped out the spitting flames upon them.

‘Well, sir,’ he said calmly—‘you, sir, what do

you intend to do? Will you save this lady? or tell me the way and I will do so.'

'I don't know what to advise,' gasped Watson, his face haggard and distorted by fear. 'Every way is blocked. We'll burn to death here! God! oh God! there's no way out—none—and we'll burn!'

Sybil stood pale as death, wringing her hands in a tearless silence. Her dressing wrapper had opened in the rush, and her chest and shoulder shone like marble in the red glow. The heat was fast becoming unbearable, the smoke dense and more biting. She felt her eyesight failing, and sank on the sofa in a speechless terror.

Watson sprang to his feet on a sudden, writhing his arms in the air.

'I know a way!' he cried. 'We must try to reach the floor above us. If any help is coming to us, it will have to reach us from there. We can get into the gallery bar there, or out on to the roof if necessary.'

Fear quickened the man's wits, and his intimate acquaintance with the disposition of the theatre allured him with the hope of a possible escape.

'Don't lose a second!' he cried desperately. 'We must get at the ceiling and break through it

— anything — a hammer — fireirons — anything !
Quick ! quick !

They piled two smaller tables upon the larger one which Sybil used for dressing, and gathering up poker and shovel from the fireplace, smashed away all the ceiling. The plaster flew about in great flakes, and the dust and mortar followed it, and they soon succeeded in breaking through the lathwork. The boards offered a sterner resistance, and although attacked by both men with all their might, would not give way.

In the meantime the fire had gained a hold on the room, and a wardrobe near the window was burning briskly. The smoke was so dense, the heat so stifling, that Sybil flung herself full length upon the sofa and sobbed aloud.

Miller managed to insert the poker in a small interstice, and thus getting a leverage, pulled and tugged away with all his might. He was quite sober now, and the danger to Sybil gave him a giant's strength. The board creaked and bent, and at last cracked and broke ; but the strained steel slipped from Miller's hand, and, swinging back with a terrible force against his shoulder, sent him crashing on to the floor. Watson jumped down after him, and, without even a momentary glance

at the injured man, picked up the poker and went to work again savagely. The board broke again, and Watson, placing a chair on top of the second table, burst an opening into the room above large enough for a man to creep through.

The flames were licking the furniture near by, and were creeping along the shelves of the wall.

Watson called 'Sybil! Sybil!' but the girl merely raised her head and sank back in a swoon.

'This way! Quick! this way!' he cried; 'haste before it is too late!'

At that moment the flames burst through the door with a demoniac roar.

Watson uttered a cry of fear, and without looking back, climbed through the opening, and the chair on which he had stood and the little tables fell on to the floor.

Miller, recovering from the stunning blow, raised himself with a sullen pain. His left shoulder and arm were powerless, and his head swam; but the sight of Sybil lying prone and lifeless upon the sofa, whilst the fire darted nearer her, roused all his faculties. Heedless of the torture he was inflicting upon himself in the midst of the scorching heat, he again placed the smaller tables upon the larger one, and the chair upon these, and taking

the limp figure of the unconscious girl in his uninjured arm, he swung her above him, whilst the flames already flickered about them, and singed his hair and face. He forced her through the opening as well as he could, regardless of the splinters that remained ; for the girl's light clothing had started to blaze, and he had smothered the flame with difficulty. Sybil moaned and then shrieked. A projecting nail had torn her face and the flesh of her arm, and the pain revived her senses. She scrambled to her feet, and feeling the blood trickling from both wounds, fainted again in the midst of the smoke, with which the room above was already filled.

Miller climbed after her, with his face scorched raw, and his hands bleeding from a half a dozen wounds. He took Sybil into his arms again, gently, delicately, and carrying her like a baby, he dashed away with her into the passage, where the air was purer and the heat less deadly. At the further end a patch of horizon shone blue and cold, and the young man, making for that as for his salvation, found a window which opened on to a low roof.

He jumped out, and dragged the still fainting girl after him. At his side the untouched wall of

the burning house loomed black as a coal, but above it he could see the red reflection of the flames.

Then the pain of his injured shoulder became intense, and a sudden faintness crept over him. He sank down by Sybil's side, and wound his arm about her, and kissed her cold white face. She opened her eyes with a piteous wonder, and, looking about her strangely for the space of two heart-beats, threw her arms around his neck and burst into a flood of tears.

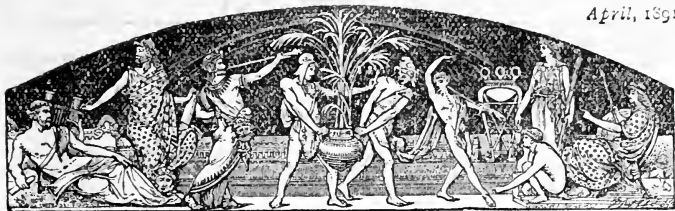
After that all became dark to him—dark and black as death itself—and he knew no more.

The Royal Charing Cross Theatre was saved from destruction, and no lives were lost. How the fire originated was never proven. The fireman was discharged, but Miller found him other employment.

Sybil escaped at the cost of her beauty. A red scar remained on her face. She had to retire from the stage, but to Herbert Miller she was as beautiful as ever.

For they forgave one another in glad thankfulness.

THE END.



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